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Bush's implicit answer to Sheehan's question

President Bush has evaded Cindy Sheehan's question, "What was the noble cause that my son died for?" But he provided a partial answer on the day that the New Orleans levees gave way.

The media coverage was scant and fleeting but we should not allow the nation's Orwellian memory hole to swallow up a revealing statement in Bush's speech at a naval air station near San Diego. In the Aug. 30 speech, moments after condemning "a brutal campaign of terror in Iraq," the president said: "If Zarqawi and bin Laden gain control of Iraq, they would create a new training ground for future terrorist attacks. They'd seize oil fields to fund their ambitions." In other words, the U.S. war effort in Iraq must continue because control of Iraqi oil is at stake.

Would U.S. troops be in Iraq if that country didn't have a drop of oil under its sand? Most politicians dodge that kind of question. And for years, the U.S. news media – with few exceptions – have elided the oily obvious. Such denials go back a long way.

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On Aug. 15, 1990 – two weeks after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait – President George H.W. Bush expressed great concern about oil as the Pentagon moved to deploy troops and weaponry to the Persian Gulf. Of course the confrontation was about "our own national security interests" along with ensuring "peace and stability," but there was something more.

"We are also talking about maintaining access to energy resources that are key – not just to the functioning of this country, but to the entire world," the president said. "Our jobs, our way of life, our own freedom and the freedom of friendly countries around the world would all suffer if control of the world's great oil reserves fell into the hands of Saddam Hussein," he declared.

But by autumn the official story had shifted. Confronted by protesters while speaking at a fundraiser in Des Moines, the president had this rejoinder: "You know, some

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people never get the word. The fight isn't about oil. The fight is about naked aggression that will not stand." Addressing a Republican crowd in Vermont a week later, the first President Bush flatly said that "it isn't oil that we're concerned about. It is aggression. And this aggression is not going to stand."

Papering over corporate interests with humanitarian ones is standard media operating procedure for presidents and their administrations along with many pundits. On the last day of November 2003, with U.S. troops occupying Iraq, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman gushed that "this war is the most important liberal, revolutionary U.S. democracy-building project since the Marshall Plan." He lauded the war as "one of the noblest things this country has ever attempted abroad." Friedman did not mention the estimated 112 billion barrels of untapped oil in Iraq.

he publicized arguments in favor of war do not usually include zeal to serve corporate interests. But once in a blue moon, politicians opt to openly illuminate such motives, as when – during congressional debate in January 1991, a few days before the Gulf War began – Senator Warren Rudman grounded the prevailing lofty arguments with a factor more crude. "Can anyone reasonably assert," he asked, "that it would serve our interests to mortgage the production and pricing levels of nearly one-half of the world's proven oil reserve to the whims of an ambitious tyrant? I think not."

A dozen years later, weeks before the invasion of Iraq, liberal Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen launched a barrage of invective against a member of Congress who had dared to identify oil as "the strongest incentive" for the impending war. Cohen was vitriolic. The first word of his column was "liar." From there, he peppered his piece with references to Representative Dennis Kucinich as an "indomitable demagogue" and a "fool" who was "repeating a lie."

But Cohen would have done well to reread a front page of his own newspaper. Five months earlier, on Sept. 15, 2002, a page-one Post story carried the headline "In Iraqi War Scenario, Oil Is Key Issue; U.S. Drillers Eye Huge Petroleum Pool." In the article, Ahmad Chalabi, the exile leader of the U.S.-backed Iraqi National Congress, said that he favored the creation of a U.S.-led consortium to develop oil fields in a post-Saddam Iraq: "American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi oil."

The same Post article quoted former CIA Director James Woolsey – a Chalabi supporter who, according to a Legal Times story, had been on the payroll of Chalabi's group. Woolsey said: "France and Russia have oil companies and interests in Iraq. They should be told that if they are of assistance in moving Iraq toward decent government, we'll do the best we can to ensure that the new government and American companies work closely with them. If they throw in their lot with Saddam, it will be dif-

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difficult to the point of impossible to persuade the new Iraqi government to work with them.”

As business pages had sometimes indicated, it was actually quite reasonable to identify oil as very important in U.S. policy toward Iraq. But in political news coverage, and among all but a few mainstream political pundits, such talk was in general dispute.

On Wall Street, financial analysts were inclined to be much more candid than politicians or political reporters. “Think of Iraq as a military base with a very large oil reserve underneath,” said Fadel Gheit, an expert on the oil industry for Oppenheimer & Company. He added: “You can’t ask for better than that.” After more than a quarter century of tracking the oil business, Gheit commented: “Think of Iraq as virgin territory. ... It is the superstar of the future. That’s why Iraq becomes the most sought-after real estate on the face of the earth.”

A Toronto Star columnist and author, Linda McQuaig, cited internal documents that the Bush administration had used for policy formulation (papers not intended for public viewing but released due to a successful lawsuit). In spring 2001, high-ranking Bush officials and oil firm execs pored over a map showing details of “Exploration Blocks” and other intricacies of Iraq’s oil fields. Meeting in secret, the energy task force –chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney –had also examined a chart that featured information about 63 oil companies from 30 nations under the heading “Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfields.”

–The documents, McQuaig wrote, “suggest that those who took part in the Cheney task force – including senior oil company executives – were very interested in Iraq’s oil and specifically in the danger of it falling into the hands of eager foreign oil companies, rather than into the rightful hands of eager U.S. oil companies. As the documents show, prior to the U.S. invasion, foreign oil companies were nicely positioned for future involvement in Iraq, while the major U.S. oil companies, after years of U.S.-Iraqi hostilities, were largely out of the picture.” Of course, for oil corporations based in the USA, that picture would drastically change after the invasion.

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On Aug. 30, 2005, less than a minute after declaring that if terrorists “gain control of Iraq” they would “seize oil fields to fund their ambitions,” President Bush vowed: “We will stay on the offensive. We will stand with the people of Iraq. And we will prevail.”

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The next day, the Associated Press reported that "President Bush answered growing antiwar protests yesterday with a fresh reason for U.S. troops to continue fighting in Iraq: protection of the country's vast oil fields, which he said would otherwise fall under the control of terrorist extremists." The end of another AP dispatch noted: "A one-time oilman, Bush has rejected charges that the war in Iraq is a struggle to control the nation's vast oil wealth. The president has avoided making links between the war and Iraq's oil reserves, but the soaring cost of gasoline has focused attention on global petroleum sources."

For years, war supporters have pooh-poohed slogans like "No Blood for Oil." But let the record show: In a scripted speech, the president of the United States has cited Iraqi oil as a key reason for the U.S. military to keep killing in Iraq.

*This article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book
"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death."
For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com*