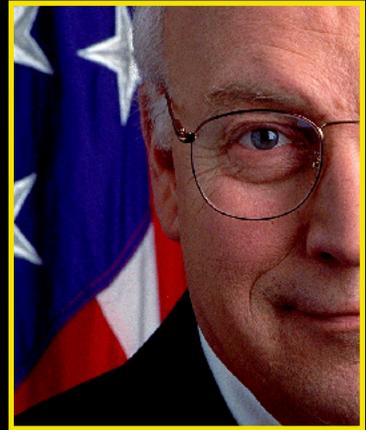


GIVE IT

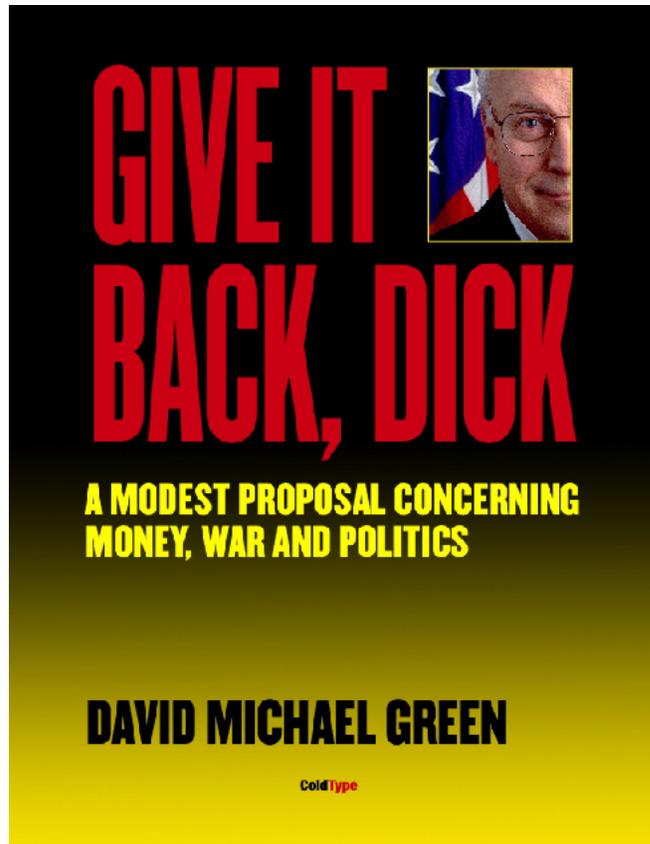


BACK, DICK

**A MODEST PROPOSAL CONCERNING
MONEY, WAR AND POLITICS**

DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

ColdType



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INDULGE me for a moment, wouldya? Let's mull over a few related facts and see where it takes us.

Fact #1: With the possible exception of George W. Bush, no one in the world is more responsible for launching the war in Iraq than is Dick Cheney.

Fact #2: Mr. Cheney still retains a substantial financial interest in Halliburton, the corporation he used to head as CEO.

Fact #3: Mr. Cheney knows that he still possesses that financial interest (this is not a blind trust arrangement).

Fact #4: Halliburton has received multi-tens-of-billion dollar contracts to provide services in the post-Iraq war occupation.

Fact #5: Halliburton received these contracts without having to competitively bid for them.

Fact #6: The Department of Defense received instructions from the Vice President's office to arrange these highly lucrative contracts, and to do so on these highly unusual terms.

Fact #7: Halliburton subsidiary KBR charged the government a record-breaking 55 percent overhead on its contracts.

Fact #8: KBR hid its schemes by marking the entirety of all information it gave to the government as "proprietary", taking advantage of a contract provision meant to protect companies from unfair competitor advantage, and instead used it to block oversight and investigation.

Fact #9: A (Republican) auditor who uncovered Halliburton fraud in Iraq had his position and office terminated by a clause slipped overnight into war funding legislation passed by the GOP Congress and signed by George Bush.

Fact #10: A Halliburton employee was fired for informing her managers that the company was fraudulently overcharging the American government in billing against its contracts.

Fact #11: Abundant evidence exists suggesting that Halliburton is guilty of myriad

GIVE IT BACK, DICK | DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

contracting crimes in Iraq.

Fact #12: In 2005 the GOP controlled Senate blocked the establishment of a special committee to investigate Iraq war contracting irregularities. Every single Republican senator except Lincoln Chafee and one other who missed the vote – 53 in all – voted against investigating these crimes, despite the party’s endless claims of impassioned concern for both the taxpayers and the troops.

Fact #13: Halliburton, now headquartered in Dubai, continues to make tens of billions of dollars from the Iraq war.

Fact #14: Therefore, so does Dick Cheney, chief driving force behind the Iraq war.

You know, I’m not always crazy about the prospect of getting older and grayer, but there are also other days when I’m glad to have been around for a little while. This is one of them. Politics have been so ugly in America, and have so distorted reality, since the regressive right came to power twenty-five years ago, and especially since the Bush nightmare began, that I worry if someone younger than I could have the perspective provided by first-hand experience to recognize just how bad things are. I wonder if later generations understand that there was a time when politicians would never have allowed even the appearance produced by the above litany of facts to exist. And I wonder, as well, if they know that had any government figure ever dared do something so callously brazen as what Cheney has done here, he or she would have been politically lynched by an angry mob of voters. The Vice President making millions off a war he launched? You’re joking, right? Not today. Not anymore.

(And if I’m right to wonder these things, then I must also wonder what happens if we’re subjected to another four or eight years of Cheneyism, under Giuliani, Thompson or, gulp, Cheney himself. Will there, at some point before too long, be anyone left who remembers the better days of American democracy? Will there be anyone left who knows for sure, because they’ve actually lived it themselves, that an alternative to this nightmare isn’t just some Pollyannish dream? If ever I think we’re seeing the worst of this nightmare, that scenario chills me even deeper. As in Orwell, when the memory fades, so does the hope.)

The concept that wars have been fought, in part or in whole, to benefit those who are enriched by them is not a new one. Going back at least to the “merchants of death” thesis offered as an explanation of World War I and up through present concerns about oil motives, many have pointed to an apparent connection between war and profit (a connection which was considerably more overt in centuries prior to the era of modern democracy). Perhaps for that very reason, there came a time when

GIVE IT BACK, DICK | DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

scenarios such as that described in the list of facts outlined above would not have been permitted to occur because they would have seemed incredibly unseemly even in appearance, not to mention undermining of public support for the government's war policy at any given time.

But today, of course, nothing is any longer sacred. Having shredded the Constitution itself in so many ways, and having lied profusely to take the country to a disastrous war, very little remains unimaginable from the lot controlling American government, even that they might have gone to war for personal profit.

And maybe it's not true. You know, maybe it just happens to look bad, even though the underlying truth is all copacetic. I'm sure Tony Snow, the White House wizard of blizzard, would argue that, though only if he was asked twice. The first time he would go completely apoplectic, and say that he wasn't going to dignify a question in such poor taste with an answer.

Perhaps he's on to something there. After all, while hippies and liberals had better things to do in the Sixties than going to Vietnam, Dick Cheney was waist deep in the jungle, serving his country like a true patriot. Since then, this great American was twice legitimately elected Vice President of the United States. He has upheld his inaugural oath to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution" at every turn. With a lesbian daughter of his own, he stood up in principle and made sure his party didn't attack gays for purposes of crass electoral gain. And he helped arrange for Valerie Plame to be liberated from the drudgery of a career as an undercover spy for the CIA that she no longer wanted.

All of which is true, except for the part that isn't. Which turns out to be every bit of it. Let's not kid ourselves about the extent to which this guy represents everything that is evil, illegal, unconstitutional and ugly in a society attempting to sustain democracy, good governance and a mature and moral politics. Once we understand who we're dealing with here, it's less of a leap – but still a jaw-dropping one nonetheless – to arrive at this inescapable conclusion: Cheney is profiting handsomely from a war he created and the illicit contracts he arranged to be signed, and that he has since protected from being investigated.

'Obscene' is too nice a word for something that ugly. 'Harrowing', 'nauseating' or 'hideous' don't do it justice. Thinking of the dead and the maimed and the shattered strewn across Mesopotamia, my thesaurus is groaning in sympathetic heartbreak at something so literally inhuman that mere words can no longer adequately symbolize the concepts. What kind of monster impersonating a human being can cause this much destruction to occur and walk away from it with a personal profit?

Nowadays, regressives and progressives can find little upon which to agree, includ-

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ing even stipulating which basic descriptive facts accurately describe our condition — let alone preferred national policies. But couldn't we all simply concur that making money from other people's death is completely beyond the pale? Can't we agree that no one should ever be in a position to profit from the decisions they make in government, especially those concerning war?

Maybe the fact that military conflict can be so profitable for people who tend to be very well connected to policy-makers has never in history actually had anything to do with a country going to war. Maybe. But, just in case, I have a modest proposal I'd like to make: How about if we collectively decide that never again will profits be made on an American war? Simple as that. How about if we decide that all weapons and military materiel shall be either government produced or provided on a break-even, non-profit basis?

"Ridiculous and absurd", I can hear my regressive friends squealing in high dudgeon. "We need the engine of profit to motivate private industry to develop our weapons systems and supply our armed forces, especially nowadays, when war is a high-tech affair".

To which I'd like to respond, "Really?"

Funny, they all seem so patriotic and driven by the national interest when you listen to their rhetoric. Surely they don't need the profit motive to do their very best to outfit our soldiers, do they? Surely they'd rather see that money go to the purchase of additional armor and more weapons to keep our military personnel safe, wouldn't they? Surely, with troops in the field making the supreme sacrifice every day, such rah-rah patriots of the weapons industry would agree that sacrificing their personal jet or their second yacht to pitch-in for the national defense is the least they can do, right?

I'm not arguing that defense industry workers should have to donate their time. They shouldn't, any more than should letter carriers. And I'm not arguing that all weapons and equipment should be made only by government-owned industries. If the private sector wants to accept contracts from the government to produce weaponry, that's fine and let's make sure everyone receives a fair (but only fair) salary for their contributions — as long as it happens without profits being made, hidden or overt. Indeed, I think it would be no less equitable to require a profitless defense industry of corporations than it is to have a draft (like the one Mr. Cheney got five deferments from) in order to fill the ranks of an army. Not that such patriots would object, of course — since they're not in it for the money — but why not require them to contribute to the national defense as a cost of being a chartered American corporation, just like the rest of us contribute via taxes or conscription?

GIVE IT BACK, DICK | DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

And, ahem, we happen to be talking about a lot of contribution here. In 2006 alone, ‘defense’ industry firms did very nicely, thank you very much. (And they should thank you, of course, since you paid for it.) Pentagon spending has never been higher, well over \$600 billion, including spending for Iraq and Afghanistan, and not even counting DOE nukes and the VA. The United States now literally spends more on its military than the entire rest of the world combined. Just the last year alone has been quite lovely for those in the armaments business. Lockheed Martin, America’s largest military contractor, began 2006 with its stock trading at around \$62 per share. It ended the year at about \$92 a share. Boeing, in the number two position, went from about \$66 per share to nearly \$89, Raytheon from \$39 to more than \$53, and General Dynamics from the high \$50s to almost \$74 during the same period. Oh, and Halliburton? Its stock was trading at around ten or twelve bucks a share when the war was launched in 2003. Since then, it has climbed up to \$40 per share, as the company has raked in more than \$20 billion in Iraq. Wow, those are some pretty heady numbers. I wouldn’t mind getting my own little piece of that! What’s that you say? People have to die to drive up those stocks values? Shoot, that takes the fun entirely out of it. Couldn’t I just pretend it’s all to defend our country against bad foreign people?

Right now, the burdens for conducting the war in Iraq fall upon a sadly narrow segment of the American population. Nobody’s getting drafted. Nobody has to give up shopping or Happy Meals or anything. Nobody’s even paying extra in taxes. In fact, right in the middle of a war (actually two), Americans have been handed what they think is a tax cut! (Wait till they have to pony up, with interest, their share plus the share of the wealthy who got most of the cut, all of which was borrowed and must be repaid. But that’s another story.) It’s a completely free ride except for the few hundred thousand troops stuck with Iraq duty, plus their loved ones, who are carrying the entire burden for a society of three hundred million people.

If we are to have any shred of pretense to fairness whatsoever, it strikes me that the very minimum we can do as a people is to take a definitive stand against any sort of profits being made from war, to the greatest extent we can. Perhaps, when fewer people stand to benefit from organized violence, this will mean less war. But even if it does not, even if the merchants of death theory is incorrect, isn’t this the most basic statement of morality that we as a society can make? If we ultimately conclude that wars must be fought, can we not stand for the principle that the burden shall be shared to the extent possible, and that – also to the extent possible – nobody should benefit?

Indeed, right here, right now, perhaps our good friends at Lockheed, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Boeing and Halliburton would like to make a bold gesture.

GIVE IT BACK, DICK | DAVID MICHAEL GREEN

Perhaps our seemingly so patriotic Vice President and all the strato-burghers in his neighborhood would join them in demonstrating their true commitment to the nation and the soldiers fighting on their behalf by donating every cent in profits made from the Iraq war to our underpaid military personnel, and to the families of those troops consumed by the military adventure Mr. Cheney's ordered.

If we cannot do anything else as a people, can we not agree that no person, no company, no vice president, should ever be making profits while these poorly-paid and poorly-equipped soldiers are rotting away in the middle of the 130-degree civil war shooting gallery that is today's Iraq.

How unbelievably sick is that?



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