

# A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT: THE PURSUIT OF OIL IN A GLOBAL AGE

BRIAN DAWSON

**T**hough seldom mentioned by American politicians and news media, the world is still recovering from the worst ecological disaster to occur in modern Europe. On November 13, 2002, the *Prestige*, a Greek-owned tanker carrying 84,849 tons of oil, began to fracture in choppy seas off the coast of Spain. As the leaking vessel began to slowly sink, the Dutch salvage company in charge of its rescue requested that the *Prestige* be towed to a small bay where the spill could be contained. After Spain refused to allow the tanker near its coast, Portugal dispatched a warship to ensure, unequivocally, that the *Prestige* would find no shelter in its territorial waters. Several days of debate produced a solution mutually agreed upon by the various European countries involved: tow the *Prestige* to Africa (Tremlett). Unfortunately for the European community, the decision was made too late—they were unable to export their problem to the developing world. The crippled boat had become completely submerged and strong currents and winds had spread oil across nearly two-hundred miles of shoreline. Since the tragedy, the once commercially viable fishing and shellfish industry has been decimated by toxic pollutants, more than 300,000 seabirds have died, and up to 24,000 tons of oil still floats in slicks off the Spanish, French, and English coasts (Brown and Tremlett).

Transporting petroleum products by sea is an extraordinarily hazardous business, particularly considering that two-thirds of the world's oil tankers have the older single hull design, like the *Prestige* (Adams). The more modern double hull tankers offer some protection from spills, but many countries, like Russia, have yet to begin replacing older ships that the International Maritime Organization has required to be phased out by 2015 (Brown). Even with the limited protection provided by a double hull, spills are bound to happen. The four major cleanup methods—containment, skimming, solvents, and burning—are poor at best. Containment by floating barriers fails in rough seas, skimming only recovers oil from the water's surface, solvents come with their own potential for ecological damage, and burning causes terrible air pollution (Adams). The reality is that the more oil we ship across the ocean, the more we increase the chances of catastrophe.

Sadly, the dangers involved in the international petroleum business are not restricted to transport; the dangers include hostile geo-political relations. Yet, blaming the oil industry for current American aggression in the Middle East does nothing to reduce the underlying issues surrounding this international conflict. “Blood for oil” may be a catchy slogan and it may be justified, but adopting platitudes fails to answer the why. The core of this question centers on individual responsibility and the environment. In war and the global ecosystem, why is there an “us” and a “them”? In

order to respond to this question, it becomes necessary to examine the actions of not simply our military, but all personnel presently conducting business abroad that could affect ecological or political stability.

Foreign governments' environmental restrictions on oil operations pale in comparison to those of the United States. Multinational corporations embrace these lax regulations overseas as a means to save money. However, cutting corners financially has resulted in dire consequences ecologically. In Ecuador, for example, an ongoing lawsuit has accused ChevronTexaco of polluting 2.5 million acres of rainforest. Rather than properly disposing of toxic waste, ChevronTexaco discharged up to four million gallons a day of heavy-metal contaminated wastewater directly into the Amazon wetlands. Additionally, they discarded liquid drilling waste in hundreds of open, unlined pits, near dozens of indigenous villages (Vidal). In the United States, these would have been flagrant environmental violations leading to criminal prosecutions. In Ecuador, ChevronTexaco saved four billion dollars and may eventually have to pay minor reparations. With no rules governing global drilling operations, the oil industry has no incentive to respect fragile environments abroad.

It's unfortunate we need the oil industry at all, but consumption of oil and gas in the United States continues to rise. Even if we assume that the tireless efforts of conservationists will succeed and hydrocarbon usage will not increase, our current level of consumption is staggering. The United States makes up less than five percent of the world's population, yet we devour more than twenty-five percent of its petroleum (NationMaster). Annually, slightly more than half of the oil we burn through is imported. Virtually all of this imported crude is produced in countries with substandard environmental regulations and then shipped via tanker to the United States. In order to minimize damage to the global ecosystem, petroleum production must be conducted under strictly controlled conditions and transport across oceans must be curtailed.

Environmentalists unanimously agree that any drilling operations should be executed with absolute care. The problem is, realistically, that there are very few places where production can be rigorously controlled. Compounding this, the few nations who demand corporations comply with strict environmental guidelines also seem to hold fast to the contradictory ideal: "Not in my backyard." Crowds cheer outside a courthouse after an injunction is handed down blocking an oil company from drilling in their area. The people, proud they were able to protect their community, return to normal life without a thought to the consequences of their actions. The oil industry is constantly searching for more production; when they are denied in one region it is easy to find another where the locals do not have access to the same time, education, and finances that would allow them to fully comprehend the potential harm to their environment. Don't all people, regardless of background, deserve the same protections for their land and waterways?

Apparently in Russia, they do not. Sakhalin Island is at the far northeast corner of Russia. After repeatedly being denied drilling permits on federal land in Alaska, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch/Shell simply sought a target that most similarly matched the Alaskan coast in reservoir volume and geology. In this case, the target happened to lie directly across the bay on Sakhalin Island, Russia. Of course, Sakhalin is not protected by the same environmental rules that govern Alaska.

The Wall Street Journal's Jim Carlton said of the situation, "Therein lies a global tradeoff: As environmental groups scramble to shield one piece of the planet from oil exploration, the drilling rigs pop up on another sensitive front." Since the start of the Sakhalin project, ExxonMobil has allowed seismic blasting within 2.5 miles of endangered gray whales. In Alaska, a twelve-mile buffer is enforced to keep from driving the whales away from migratory routes and feeding grounds. Shell regularly discharges toxic drilling muds into shallow ocean water. All such dumping is prohibited in Alaska to protect marine life.

To date, neither company has put forth any method to protect salmon from pipeline discharges, while a specific plan is required in the United States. Perhaps most disturbing is that multinationals transport the oil, by tanker, through the Tartar Straits in winter broken-ice conditions. In 2000, Alaska forced the oil industry to run spill cleanup tests in broken-ice—the corporations failed every test. Since then, tanker transport in Alaska, minimal already as a result of extensive pipeline infrastructure, is halted during broken-ice conditions (Carlton). Ultimately, the perpetuation of environmental nationalism contradicts the realities of a global ecosystem. In order to stop the "global tradeoff," we must direct the resource industry to locations with the most rigid environmental laws.

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is one such location. To clarify, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or ANWR, encompasses 19.5 million acres of Alaska's northeast corner. The sole area that has ever been discussed as a possible exploration target is the ANWR's 1.5 million-acre coastal strip. The last plan debated proposed opening seven percent of the ANWR for drilling. Most environmental organizations estimate the reserves at around 3.2 billion barrels of oil, whereas industry studies put the number at sixteen billion barrels. Using just the low-end figure, the United States could replace six years crude oil supply from our largest and most contentious importing region—the Middle East (ANWR).

The ANWR makes an ideal site not only due to its substantial reserves, but because public concern would force all drilling operations to be conducted under an environmental microscope. In fact, the state of Alaska proudly proclaims the environmental restrictions it places on the petroleum industry are the "most heavily regulated in the world" (ANWR). However, in addition to volume and environmental standards, there is one other factor that must be considered in this particular area—the opinion of the Native Americans who live there.

The Eskimos are the lone inhabitants of the ANWR, and although some individual tribes dissent, most support opening up their lands to drilling. Nicholas D. Kristof, of the *New York Times*, summed up the Eskimo's sentiments after spending a week in the ANWR, "Some resent the idea that American environmentalists 5,000 miles away want to lock them forever in a quaint wilderness, just for the psychic value of knowing that it is there." As Kristof discovered, Alaska's indigenous community sees oil drilling as a means to achieve better schools and more jobs. They are upset that people who live elsewhere deny them access to more comfortable lives. The Eskimos are no strangers to petroleum as oil has pooled in patches along their coastal lands for thousands of years. In an interview with an Eskimo tribesman, Kristof states that Bert Akootchoot "angrily told me that if environmentalists were so anxious about the Arctic, they should come here and clean up the petroleum that naturally seeps to the surface of the tundra." The human factor, particularly from a too often ignored population segment, lends credible weight to the already sound argument in favor of oil drilling in the ANWR.

The ANWR's oil could be best leveraged by coupling it with a substantial source of natural gas in order to ensure the United States lasting sovereignty as an energy producer. Gas is rapidly becoming the more important resource as the United States shifts its energy policies. Ninety percent of all new power plants in the United States will utilize natural gas (Raabe). Yet, many existing gas plants, particularly in California, currently operate at less than full capacity due to a shortage in supply. Trends among electricity producers suggest a steadily increasing demand for natural gas. This is good news for the environment since gas burns far cleaner than coal or oil. Moreover, by furthering our reliance on gas, we decrease dependence on foreign nations for oil. The question then becomes, where will this gas come from? The Rocky Mountain Front is estimated to contain 2.2 trillion cubic feet of gas (Herring). That's roughly forty-one percent of the gas reserves in the United States. Most of it lies beneath federal lands: Glacier National Park, the Scapegoat Wilderness Area, and the Lewis and Clark reserve. For the moment, these lands are completely closed to drilling.

The argument for drilling in the Rocky Mountain Front is similar to that of the ANWR. However, it is worth mentioning the significant technological improvements that make drilling, particularly for gas, more friendly to the environment. Directional drilling allows multiple wells to be drilled from one location. Prior to directional drilling, each well would need its own well-bore and ground level pad with associated machinery. Gas wells, which are generally much deeper than oil wells, require enormous drilling rigs that initially had to be moved around from one pad to the next.

All of this contributed to far more clutter above and below ground. Now, rigs are often fixed to a particular location, much like an offshore platform. This drastically cuts down on subterranean ecological damage and also reduces the surface drilling area to a fraction of its original size. In turn, this provides drilling operators a much better opportunity to hide their equipment, thus minimizing the negative impact on

wilderness scenery. The aesthetics of the Rocky Mountain Front are, understandably, of great concern to those who live in the surrounding region. Yet, there is more at stake than just aesthetics, and unlike Alaska's ANWR, the Rocky Mountain community is split on whether to allow drilling or not.

A large portion of the population in and immediately adjacent to the Rocky Mountain Front's federal lands fall into two demographics: poor working-class families or wealthy landowners. The working class fills the industrial labor jobs in mills, mines, quarries, and the like. The wealthy are mostly vacation homeowners with mountain escapes. Not surprisingly, the poor favor drilling since its revenues will likely lend their communities a much-needed economic boost. Nonprofit groups advocating the development of federal land support these local economic interests with appeals to the national concern regarding consumption.

Claire Moseley of Public Lands Advocacy, a grassroots organization formed by local laborers, recently said of the Rocky Mountain National Front, "We think it is one of the most important reserves in the country . . . and it makes no sense to set it aside when we are facing natural gas shortages" (Herring). The potential positive effects on the lives of their neighbors and on the nation's energy supply fail to influence the wealthy part-time residents who continue to oppose any drilling outright. Undoubtedly, they would grumble if their home/private ski lodge had no heat to keep their guests warm or no lights to distinguish the scotch from the bourbon. At the same time, the thought of oil drilling near their pristine manicured landscape would most certainly elicit the familiar response, "Not in my backyard." Consequently, for the moment, the Rocky Mountain Front's local population stands at an impasse.

Too often the debate regarding domestic drilling is stalemated because no room is left for compromise. Proposed policies seem to be one extreme or the other. The environmentalists oppose all drilling period, while the energy industry wants complete autonomy to drill anywhere. This issue is not so black and white; the solution is dependent on finding a middle ground. A plan must be formulated which benefits both sides without antagonizing the opposition. Industry could be allowed careful exploration in the ANWR and the Rocky Mountain Front, potentially followed by limited commercial drilling. In exchange, there should be an increase in carbon emissions standards, major additional funding for studies on renewable energy, incentives for corporations who produce energy saving products, and more stringent vehicle mileage requirements.

This line of thinking is slowly gaining support. Yale's esteemed environmental law professor, Daniel Esty, has proposed a similar policy and other academics are beginning to investigate taking a middle-of-the-road stance (Kristof). Nationally, the benefits to this approach would include a decline in air pollution, real advances in the pursuit for "clean" power, a reduction in electricity and fuel consumption, and most significantly, decreased reliance on foreign oil imports.

Internationally, it is essential that we reach an agreement on this issue since the United States foreign policy is and is perceived to be dictated by our energy policy. Going back several decades, all our presidential administrations have made securing resources a strategic priority. In 1980, Jimmy Carter said that any attempt to impede the flow of oil in the Persian Gulf would be regarded as an “assault on the vital interests of the United States,” and would be “repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” More recently, an energy review, launched by Dick Cheney in May 2002, recommended to President Bush that he “make energy security a priority of our trade and foreign policy” (Vidal). Regardless of how intertwined these policies actually are, foreign nations, particularly in the Middle East, believe petroleum to be the key catalyst for United States military action.

Just over a year ago, *The Brookings Review* published a survey conducted in six Arab countries by Shibley Telhami, professor for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, which found that an overwhelming majority of those polled expressed a negative opinion of the United States. The respondents explained that their view was based on American policy in the Middle East. When asked what motivates this policy, eighty percent answered “oil.” The answers given least frequently were: “democracy, economic development, or peace.” Without altering this viewpoint, there remains a worldwide threat of conflict, as evidenced by the ongoing wars in eight of the top twelve nations with the most proven oil reserves (Vidal). This perceived connection, between foreign policy and energy, is not limited to an international audience.

In the United States, beginning January 2003, a series of television commercials proposed a link between geo-political instability and petroleum. One of the ads went as follows: A man is shown filling up his vehicle while a child’s voice says: “This is George. This is the gas that George bought for his SUV.” A map of the Middle East showing Iraq and Saudi Arabia appears and the voice-over continues: “These are the countries where the executives bought the oil that made the gas.” Over a shot of a terrorist training camp, it says: “And these are the terrorists who get money from those countries every time George fills up his SUV.” (Campbell)

While the specific logic depicted in this commercial can be argued, it demonstrates that an association exists here in the United States. Popular perception ties international conflict to America’s relationship with the environment, and generally speaking this is not too far from the truth. Through war and through oil excavation and transport practices, the world’s ecosystem and its people are harmed. In the United States, we have the means to reduce the chance of international disaster by working together. Environmentalists and the petroleum industry must set aside their differences and compromise. Additionally, Americans must remember that though we may be a part of a neighborhood, a city, a state, and a country, we are also a part of the global community. Now more than ever, the United States is interconnected with the worldwide economy and environment. There is no escaping the repercussions of global mismanagement. Given America’s high consumption and low production, it

must seem insulting to use force or support environmental damage in other countries to obtain energy. It is not worth preserving our land if we destroy someone else's. After all, the Earth is everyone's backyard.

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