

[Back to index](#)

## Book Reviews

Pelletière, Stephen.  
**America's Oil Wars**  
Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004. 193pp.

**Ahmed Mahdi**  
University of Birmingham

Stephen Pelletière is a former CIA senior political analyst for Iraq and a former Senior Professor of National Security Affairs at the US Army War College. *America's Oil Wars* attempts to analyse America's foreign oil policy, but unfortunately overlooks key elements critical to any debate of the topic. For one, Pelletière underestimates the nature of America's Cold War policy after 1945. For instance, he writes that the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 and the resulting rise in demand for oil was "all it took for Harry Truman and Dean Acheson to reverse course" and withdraw their support for Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq's nationalization of Iranian oil in the 1950s (p.47). He did not mention though, that the Americans abandoned Mossadeq primarily because he began to show support for the Soviets.<sup>[i]</sup> Oil was definitely a reason, but was not "all it took". Pelletière also writes that the United States initially supported Mossadeq because of America's anti-colonial policy (p.46-7), which although correct, could have been supplemented by mentioning America's fear of a pro-Soviet Iranian government if Mossadeq was ousted from office.<sup>[ii]</sup> Generally speaking, Pelletière underemphasizes Cold War priorities in America's foreign policy (especially in the Persian Gulf region).

Pelletière also implies that aside from the period following the 1973 oil boycott, the interests of the US government and those of oil companies always coincided. This is an oversimplification. For instance, following the 1956 Suez Crisis, the US government could no longer protect the interests of American oil companies due to the increased Soviet influence and propaganda in the Middle East. Pelletière also fails to mention that Eisenhower resisted the 1959 Mandatory Oil Import Program (MOIP)- import quotas which imposed barriers on oil imports in order to protect US oil companies from foreign competition- because he wanted to encourage favourable trade relations with other countries during the Cold War.<sup>[iii]</sup> Eisenhower was later forced to accept the quotas after pressure from the oil business and the Congress.<sup>[iv]</sup> These are just two examples of how America's Cold War policy did not always coincide with the oil sector's interests, a fact that Pelletière fails to adequately demonstrate.

Moreover, an examination of policy documents on the US policy toward oil is missing. For instance, NSC 10/2 (1948), NSC 26/2 (1949), and NSC 155/1 (1953) would have enhanced the argument. As a former intelligence analyst, it is strange that Pelletière ignores such documents.

Furthermore, Pelletière does not analyse the neo-conservative policy toward Middle East oil. The control of oil was indeed a fundamental rationale for the neo-conservative call to invade Iraq.<sup>[v]</sup> But Pelletière fails to account for underlying neo-conservative values and the importance of oil in relation to them. For instance, the neo-conservatives call for democratisation and regime change in the Middle East was based on a belief that democratisation will eliminate the causes of instability in the region and that only by restructuring the “Arab tyrannies” would the region’s energy supplies be secured.<sup>[vi]</sup> The neo-cons believed that invading Iraq would allow the United States to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia in order to promote stability in the region, which although they did, has not curbed terrorist activities which continue to haunt the Kingdom.<sup>[vii]</sup> The fall of the Al Saud dynasty has been expected since the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979,<sup>[viii]</sup> and this also underlies the neo-con desire to invade Iraq and impose a pro-American government on the country. Pelletière completely ignores this neo-conservative democratisation doctrine. He also fails to discuss the role of the Arab-Israeli conflict in neo-conservative thought.<sup>[ix]</sup>

Pelletière’s book is dominated by the Persian Gulf. He dedicates only a few pages to Central Asia - a major oil-producing region whose importance has increased due to the war on terror and the American invasion of Afghanistan. He also fails to mention America’s first military assault on a major oil producer when it attacked Libya in April 1986 (following the bombing of a German nightclub), the subsequent sanctions placed on Libya, and the impact on America’s global oil policy.

Nevertheless, the book does provide good analysis on some issues. For example, Pelletière does a good job of outlining how Clinton’s Persian Gulf policy differed from Bush Sr, as he decreased pressure on Israel and linked the Gulf oil policy to the Arab-Israeli peace process through the Dual Containment policy (p.118-29). However, a broader look at all the factors that determine the making of US foreign policy would have greatly improved the general content of the book.

---

1 Daniel Yergin. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*. New York: Free Press, 1991, p.468.

2 Ibid., p.465.

3 Ibid., p.536.

4 Ibid., p.538.

5 Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Deputy Director at the Pentagon, Paul Wolfowitz said that America “had no choice” but to invade, since Iraq “swims on a sea of oil”. Stephan Halper. *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p.155.

6 Ibid., p.308.

7 Ibid., p.155.

8 Richard Clarke. *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*. New York: Free Press, 2004, p.282-3.

9 By invading Iraq the neo-conservatives (wrongfully) hoped that the road to Jerusalem would go through Baghdad, and that awed Arabs would be cajoled into accommodation with Israel. "Does he know where it's leading?" *The Economist*, 30 July 2005, p.23-5.