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The Empire Needs New Clothes

by Thom Hartmann

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It's easy to vilify George W. Bush as a cynical warmonger, anxious to attack Iraq to repay the oil companies that funded his election campaigns. But to do so is to make a dangerous and fundamental error, and such a myopic view of the Bush administration's policies puts America's future at risk.

The reality is that the current administration has a clear and specific vision for the future of America and the world, and they believe it's a positive vision. In order to put forward an alternative vision, it's essential to first understand the vision of America held by the New Right.

The core of the neoconservative vision was first articulated on June 3, 1997, in the Statement of Principles put forth by the Project For The New American Century. Signed by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Bill Bennett, Jeb Bush, Gary Bauer, Elliott Abrams, Paul Wolfowitz, Vin Weber, Steve Forbes and others from the Reagan/Bush administration, it clearly stated that "the history of this century should have taught us to embrace the cause of American leadership."

Frankly acknowledging that America is a small portion of the world's population but uses a large percentage of the world's oil and other natural resources, Poppy Bush is famous for having said, "The American lifestyle is not negotiable."

McMansions for two-person families, a transportation infrastructure based on 6,000-pound SUVs carrying single individuals, cheap Chinese goods at Wal-Mart and cheap Mexican food in the supermarket -- all of this is not anything America intends to give up. We're king of the hill, and we intend to stay that way, even if it means going to war to keep it.

At the core of this is oil. When the administration's people say American involvement in Iraq is "not about oil," they're often responding to charges that they're only going after profits for American oil companies. They speak truth, in that context, when they say the war isn't about revenues from oil -- the profits will only be a desirable side-effect. What the war is really about is the survival of the American lifestyle, which, in their world-view, is both non-negotiable and based almost entirely on access to cheap oil.

The same year Cheney, *et al*, wrote their papers on The New American Century, I wrote a book about the coming end of American peace and prosperity because of our dependence on a dwindling supply of oil. "Since the discovery of oil in Titusville, PA, where the world's first oil well was drilled in 1859," I wrote in *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, "humans

have extracted 742 billion barrels of oil from the Earth. Currently, world oil reserves are estimated at about 1,000 billion barrels, which will last (according to the most optimistic estimates of the oil industry) 'for almost 45 years at current rates of consumption.'

But that doesn't mean that we'll suck on the straw for 45 years and then it'll suddenly stop. When about half the oil has been removed from an underground oil field, it starts to get much harder (and thus more expensive) to extract the remaining half. The last third to quarter can be excruciatingly expensive to extract -- so much so that wells these days that have hit that point are usually just capped because it costs more to extract the oil than it can be sold for, or it's more profitable to ship oil in from the Middle East, even after accounting for the cost of shipping.

The halfway point of an oil field is referred to as "The Hubbert Peak," after scientist M. King Hubbert, who first pointed this out in 1956 and projected 1970 as the year for the Hubbert Peak of US oil supplies. Hubbert was off by four years -- 1974 saw the initial decline in US oil production and the consequent rise in price. In 1975, Hubbert, who is now deceased, projected 2000 for a worldwide Hubbert Peak. Once that point had been hit, he and other experts suggested, the world could expect economy-destabilizing spikes in the price of oil, and wars to begin over control of this vital resource.

Most of the world has now been digitally "X-rayed" using satellites, seismic data, and computers, in the process of locating 41,000 oil fields. Over 641,000 exploratory wells have been drilled, and virtually all fields which show any promise are well-known and factored into the one-trillion barrel estimate the oil industry uses for world oil reserves.

And of that 1 trillion barrels, Saudi Arabia has about 259 billion barrels and Iraq is estimated by the US Government to have 432 billion barrels, although at the moment only about 112 billion barrels have been tapped. The rest, virgin oil, can be pumped out for as little as \$1.50 a barrel, making Iraqi oil not only the most abundant in the world, but the most profitable. This at a time when virtually all American oil fields (except the Alaska North Slope) have dwindled past the Hubbert Peak into \$5 to \$25 per barrel pumping costs.

Thus, we see that our "lifestyle" -- our ability to maintain our auto-based transportation systems, our demand for big, warm houses, and our appetite for a wide variety of cheap foods and consumer goods -- is currently based on access to cheap oil. If we assume that the American people won't tolerate a change in that lifestyle, then we can extrapolate that our very security as a stable democracy is dependent on cheap oil.

Viewed in this context, the rush to seize control of the Middle East -- where about a third of the planet's oil is located -- makes perfect sense. It's a noble endeavor, in that view, maintaining the strength and vitality of the American Empire.

Of course, there are a few cracks in this vision. In order to have such a new American century, we must be willing to foul our waters and air with the byproducts of oil combustion and oil-fired power plants, and tolerate the explosions in cancer they bring. We must be willing to gamble that raising CO2 levels won't destabilize the atmosphere and tip us into a new ice age by shutting down the Great Conveyor Belt warm-water currents in the Atlantic. We must be willing to hold the rest of the world off at the point of a bayonet, and to take on

the England/Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine type of terrorism that inevitably comes when people decide to assert nationalism and confront empire.

And, perhaps most distressing, the third George to be President of the United States must be willing to clamp down on his own dissident citizens the same way that King George III of England did in 1776. These are the requirements of empire.

The last American statesman to put forth a different vision was President Jimmy Carter, who candidly pointed out to the American people that oil was a dwindling domestic resource. Carter said that we mustn't find ourselves in a position of having to fight wars to seize other people's oil, and that a decade or two of transition to renewable energy sources would ensure the stability and future of America without destabilizing the rest of the world.

It would even lead to a cleaner environment and a better quality of life. Carter put in place energy tax credits and incentives that birthed an exploding new industry based on building solar-heated homes, windmill-powered communities, and the development of fuel alternatives to petroleum.

Ronald Reagan's first official act of office was to remove Carter's solar panels from the roof of the White House. He then repealed Carter's tax incentives for renewable energy and killed off an entire industry. No president since then has had the courage or vision to face the hard reality that Carter shared with us.

And so now we discover these oddities. Osama bin Laden, for example, explicitly said that he had attacked the US because we had troops stationed on the holy soil of his homeland -- a position not that different from Northern Irish, Palestinian, Tamil, and Kashmiri terrorists. And our troops are there to protect our access to Saudi oil, a dependence legacy we inherited from Reagan's rejection of Carter's initiatives.

If we are to hold a vision of America that doesn't depend on foreign sources of oil and doesn't require the enormous expenditures of money and blood to project and protect empire, simply saying "stop the war" isn't enough. We must clearly articulate a vision of what America could be in a world in balance, a world at peace, and a world where the planet's vital natural resources are protected and renewed. This is the ultimate family value, the highest patriotism, and the most desperately needed story to guide the next generation of Americans.

As President John F. Kennedy said in his 1961 Inaugural Address, "All this will not be finished in the first 100 days. Nor will it be finished in the first 1,000 days, nor in the life of this Administration, nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

Thom Hartmann is the author of over a dozen books, including *Unequal Protection* and *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*. This article is copyright by Thom Hartmann, but permission is granted for reprint in print, email, blog, or web media so long as this credit is attached.

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