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Iran, Venezuela and the Throes of Empire



Illustration by Nathaniel St. Clair

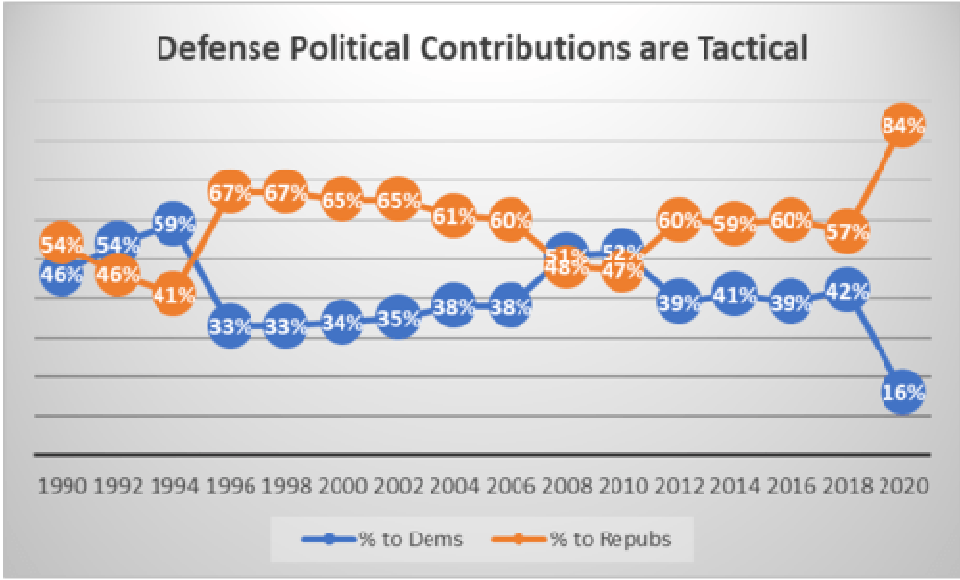
With the Trump administration threatening war against Iran and Venezuela, the question of how the U.S. was brought to this point needs to be considered. To argue that current circumstances are particular to this administration is to overlook U.S. history vis-a-vis both Iran and Venezuela and that between them they possess a material proportion of the world's proved oil reserves (graph below). In 2019, the pretense that local provocations explain anything beyond domestic political posturing is absurd.

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However, domestic political considerations do explain threats of war to a greater degree than should rationally be the case. Removing Americans from the risks of wars the U.S. starts has produced a form of technological nihilism. Just because technology can be used to kill large numbers of people without risk to self doesn't mean that it should be. Combined with economic motives for launching wars, death, destruction and misery have become just another business opportunity. At this point in history, war is what America does.

More insidiously, and admitted into evidence that the national Democrats just aren't very politically astute, two- and one-half years into a soft coup staged by key members of the surveillance and warfare states and national Democrats against his administration, Donald Trump now apparently undertsands the domestic political benefits of unhinged militarism. Through a sycophant press predisposed to support any manner of unprovoked slaughter and the myriad business interests that see their stocks rise with the same, war is apparently a good business to be in.

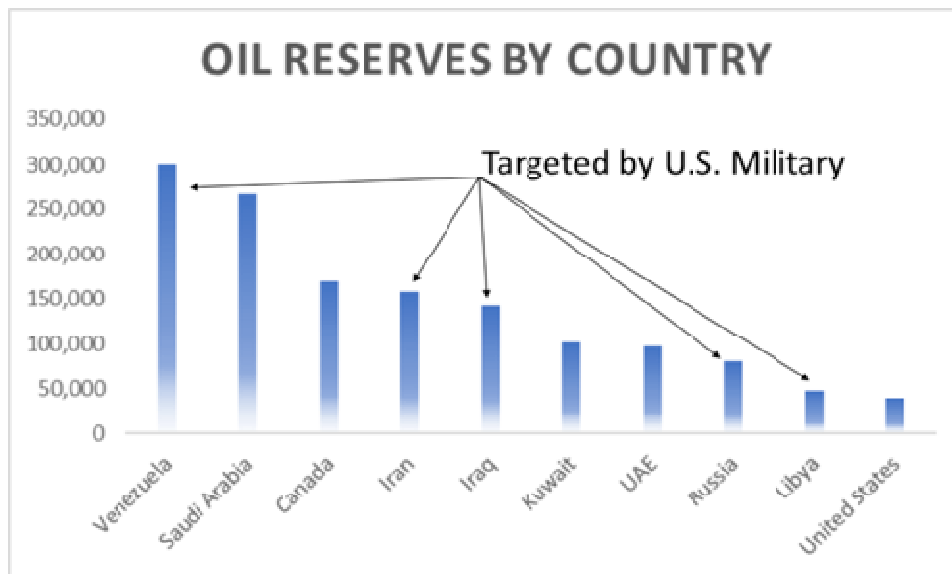


Graph: the American defense industry, in this case aerospace, generally gives more in campaign contributions to Republicans than to Democrats. However, the contributions appear to be tactical. When Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama were running for the presidency, the balance of contributions shifted to Democrats. This tactic keeps Democrats ‘competing’ for contributions from people that profit from war. Source: <https://www.opensecrets.org>.

The political logic of Russiagate was to re-assert the unity of nation as rising class tensions threaten breaks and fissures. The Democratic candidate in 2016 spent prior

decades pledging allegiance to the warfare state. Her ascension would have guaranteed persistent and murderous geopolitical tensions that she had already begun instigating during her husband's administration and as Barack Obama's Secretary of State. Whether Donald Trump's non-interventionist campaign posture was sincere, opportunistic, a 'Chance-the Gardiner' moment or a total fraud is irrelevant for present purposes.

There is every chance that Mr. Trump would have fallen in line with respect to warfare state designs on Iran and Venezuela anyway. The business case for murdering a lot of people and stealing their shit is as old as the country. The imperial view that foreign oil and gas belong to the U.S. and its allies is one that he appears to be comfortable with. That 'crazed dictator' Hugo Chavez used Venezuela's oil wealth to feed, house and educate the poor isn't what American oligarchs want getting around. So, while the claim is that foreign oil and gas belong to 'us' in some collective imperial sense, the bank accounts of the rich suggest no such confusion at the top.



Graph: were no mention made of oil, the countries listed here would constitute a who's who of American foreign policy imbroglios. Between them, current targets Iran and Venezuela hold a significant proportion of the world's oil reserves. Blather about dictators and freedom is standard fare when American oligarchs want to control global resources like oil. Current propaganda ties to a long history of American wars for resources. Source: worldatlas.com.

With respect to Mr. Trump's prospects in the 2020 presidential election, joining his warfare-state tormenters will accomplish two things. First, it will get them off his back politically. The anti-interventionist vote that helped get him elected didn't arise until a

decade or more after George W. Bush left office. So, his move toward militarism probably won't hurt him politically until the body bags start piling up. Second, such a move would deny national Democrats support from weapons manufacturers and the oil and gas industry. As the graph above suggests, defense 'industry' contributions appear to be tactical.

With the Cold War playbook now sufficiently dusted off to support another round of wars against resource-rich 'adversaries,' American political and business interests are moving to choose the most profitable targets. Through economic sanctions, 'passive' war has already been declared against both Iran and Venezuela. Economist Mark Weisbrot estimates that these sanctions have caused 40,000 civilian deaths in Venezuela since 2018. And the Trump administration imposed sanctions against Iran in early 2018 that are now taking a toll on the country's most vulnerable citizens.

These sanctions are premised in the theory that if enough people are starved and enough misery is created 'below,' the political consequences will eventually work their way 'up' to force the hands of political leaders. After Bill Clinton imposed economic sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s, half a million women and children died from starvation and treatable illnesses, with little determinable effect on the actions of former CIA 'asset' Saddam Hussein. As with Mr. Trump in the present, Bill Clinton was working to reduce the social safety net in the U.S. as he deprived the poor and vulnerable of food and medicine abroad.

This point is made because the human consequences of sanctions don't appear to be clear to Americans. Economic sanctions were called 'sieges' in olden times. And they were understood to be a tactic of war. Their political value lies in the dubious moral distinction between active and passive starvation, torture and murder. Had those killed by American sanctions in the 1990s been lined up and shot, it likely would have produced political repercussions in the U.S. It was liberal icon Barack Obama who imposed economic sanctions against Venezuela in 2015, again illustrating the bi-partisan use of 'passive' warfare.

This isn't to argue that there are no differences between the political parties on the road to war. For the last 2.5 years liberals and Democrats have been attacking Mr. Trump from the geopolitical right. By valorizing representatives of the warfare-state like James Clapper, John Brennan and Robert Mueller in order to discredit Mr. Trump politically, little political space was left for substantive criticism when hard lines are drawn. This explains in part why nationalistic rhetoric overtook the putative left. Framed as

geopolitics, their bases in warfare-state propaganda would have been distressingly evident.

To point out that weapons manufacturers and the oil and gas industry are businesses isn't to reduce geopolitical motivations to profit and loss calculations. Following the end of WWII, the fear amongst American officials was that the U.S. would sink back into the Great Depression. Military Keynesianism, the use of federal defense spending to create jobs and profits, turned warfare into the business of America. Seen through a lens of Marxian / Gramscian hegemony, militarism was made the guiding ethos of the warfare-state. And militarism will remain the path of least resistance for American politicians until political economy is redirected away from it.

In his own 'attention span of a gnat' way, Donald Trump challenged this hegemony. Liberals, progressives and Democrats used militaristic chides against him every chance they got. Détente with North Korea? Traitor! Détente with Russia? Traitor! The tyranny of the oligarchs, business interests and the warfare-state that supports them has been rendered invisible. And so, 'passive' war against Iran: population 83 million, and Venezuela: population 32 million, has been launched. Surprisingly (not), the early reports of civilian casualties have the most vulnerable and least powerful bearing the brunt of this passive warfare.

As Mr. Trump correctly adduces [here](#), the military industry is driving the push for war. The relationship between the intentions of American Generals and Russiagate can be found in allegations of Iran's 'footprint' across the Middle East. Through the client-state relationship, Iran's footprint is also Russia's footprint. The antiquated Cold War chessboard, complete with an Evil Empire supporting 'dictators' in Venezuela and Iran, has been re-imagined. Unfortunately, it hasn't be re-purposed. The problem isn't that this framing is wrong. It is that other equally cogent and demonstrable explanations exist.

The Cold War was more than anything else, a business enterprise. A more artful quote would have been found were it not for the infliction of Russiagate:

“(T)he people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. This is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and for exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”
[Hermann Goering, 1946.](#)

Russiagate was used to restore the political fortunes of the death and destruction business to promote the class interests of American oligarchs. Now that the gauntlet of war has

been cast into open waters, it is incumbent upon Washington's incumbents to dive in after it. Alternatively, the history of the CIA and MI6 using the pretext of 'communist influence' to overthrow democratically elected governments in order to steal resources and prevent increases to the minimum wage and land reform doesn't help the argument that the Cold War was motivated by ideology.

But again, this isn't to suggest that complex relationships and motives aren't at work. However, the 'how stupid are you people?' question must be asked. Venezuela has the world's largest proved oil reserves. Iran has the world's fourth largest proved oil reserves. John Bolton stated that the goal of regime change in Venezuela is to gain control of Venezuela's oil. Russia has the eighth largest proved oil reserves plus strategic access to major markets in Europe. The Obama administration engineered a coup in 2014 in the same Ukraine that is placed geographically between Russian oil and European customers for it.

Furthermore, Iran is a former client state / colony that gave the U.S. the diplomatic boot after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, leaving Israel as the only remaining client state in the region. Earlier still, in 1953 the U.S. and Britain engineered a coup after the democratically elected Mohamed Mosaddeq moved to nationalize Iran's oil. The pretext of the coup was 'communist influence' over the Iranian government, which was a complete fabrication. The coup was engineered to seize control of Iran's oil. Leading American neocons, including Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, started the Iranian nuclear program a decade or so later.

Assertions that Donald Trump's saber rattling is a deviation from American history, prior policies and the intentions of warfare and oil and gas industry functionaries, are based on technical quibbles, not fundamental policy differences. As with Iran, American neocons started Israel's nuclear weapons program through the Atoms for Peace program of the 1950s and 1960s. American deference towards Israel is likewise an ethos that emerges from the client state role that it plays in oil and gas industry machinations and the distribution of American made weapons.

As a client state, Israel serves an economic role at the behest of American oligarchs that in turn supports related industries. The power that Israel holds over American politicians ultimately derives from American military and oil and gas (public) expenditures. This is the same circumstance the American political class finds itself in. Campaign contributions from 'private' military and oil and gas companies have genesis in Federal

expenditures. The influence they wield is in this sense circular— government expenditures fund ‘private’ influence. The ethos that emerges is self-legitimizing for the private interests that benefit.

Two years plus of taunting Donald Trump from the right has left the left holding the baggy for untethering his steely anti-interventionist resolve from the hitchin’ post. And while it’s proper to question the metallurgical integrity of said resolve, he did ask questions in his run for President that landed like an oriole’s chide at Spring’s late arrival apropos the American military’s history of cluster-fuckery. The impeachment plan seems about as well considered. Supposing success that won’t occur because the Republican controlled Senate is needed to convict, Mike Pence becomes president and then what— Joe Biden? If it’s the principle, why didn’t Barack Obama prosecute the George W. Bush administration for War Crimes and Wall Street executives for financial crimes?

It’s the selectivity of the rage that seems suspect. If what you want is Democrats, then win a fucking election.

The related question from 2016 that isn’t going away anytime soon is: how do we get rid of these people, meaning the entire American political establishment? Otherwise, do ‘we’ really need four or eight more years of Democrats not ending America’s unhinged militarism, rapidly compounding climate crises, dysfunctional health care and educational systems and predatory political economy? The idiocy of Russiagate is that any jackass can play the militarist. And now, absolutely any jackass is. Mr. Trump is positioning himself for the job. Well played progressives.

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