

Iraq and Climate Change

by Michael T. Klare



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When our grandchildren and more distant descendants assemble in such classrooms as may be available and ask their teachers, “Why did our ancestors not take effective action to prevent the catastrophic effects of climate change?” one of the answers will surely be, “The war in Iraq.”

Long after this war is over, its legacy will live on in terms of this nation’s abject failure to address the climate change challenge during the early years of the twenty-first century, when it was still possible to avert global warming’s most horrendous effects. When these effects became more widely apparent, in the decades ahead, humanity will no doubt take vigorous action to deal with the problem - but by then it will be too late to prevent some of its most damaging consequences, such as dramatic sea-level rise, widespread drought and desertification, increased severe storm activity, and the collapse of vulnerable societies.

Why is the Iraq War so closely tied to our failure in addressing climate change?

Let’s begin with the obvious: the war is primarily being fought by the United States, the world’s leading producer of climate-altering “greenhouse” gases and the one country whose leadership is required for genuine progress toward solving the climate change problem. But instead of providing such leadership, the United States has been totally embroiled in conducting a losing and debilitating war.

Transformation

Overcoming the global warming problem won't be easy. In fact, it may prove the most difficult challenge humanity has ever faced. Its successful management will require a total transformation in the way we power and organize our cities, industries, farms, and transportation systems. This, in turn, will require the full attention, imagination, ingenuity, and determination of our leaders, scientists, engineers, farmers, and industrialists.

It's not something you can successfully attend to in the rare few minutes between briefings on the war, visits to the war zone, consultations with top generals, endless discussion of a new winning strategy to replace all those that have failed, arm-twisting conversations with reluctant members of Congress to convince them to approve additional funds for war, visits to troops going off to battle, visits with troops returning from battle, meetings with the families of soldiers lost in battle, more meetings with generals, more arm-twisting, more strategy sessions, and so on. Yet every account of the Bush presidency since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has indicated that the conduct of the war has occupied almost all of President George W. Bush's attention - and that of his senior staff - when it was not focused on getting re-elected or satisfying the purely venal interests of Republican insiders.

It's hardly surprising, then, that the White House has devoted little sustained attention to the global warming issue and come up with few meaningful proposals for addressing it.

It's the Oil

But, of course, this is just the beginning of the problem. What, after all, is the Iraq War all about? Pundits and historians will no doubt argue about this for decades to come, but few in the end will dispute the conclusion of former Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan that, at root, it was about the control of Middle Eastern petroleum. "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil," he wrote in his 2007 memoir, *The Age of Turbulence*.

This fact is not unrelated to global warming: In essence, the war is intended to ensure America's continued access to Middle Eastern oil, and access to Middle Eastern oil is essential to sustain America's reliance on oil to fuel its economy, and this reliance, in turn, accounts for America's largest share of greenhouse-gas emissions.

According to the latest Department of Energy **figures**, petroleum products accounted for 41% of total U.S. energy supplies in 2005, compared to 23% each for coal and natural gas. Even with all the emphasis being placed on the development of renewable sources of energy, oil is expected to remain the dominant source of the nation's energy in 2030, accounting for an estimated 40% of the total supply. And because oil supplies so much of our energy, it also produces so much of our carbon dioxide emissions - 44% of the national total in 2005, a projected 42% (*of a much higher level*) in 2030.

Gulf Domination

Iraq matters in this calculation not because it (currently) supplies that much of our oil but because it represents the culmination of a 50-year U.S. effort to dominate the Persian Gulf region as way of ensuring that this country will have access to adequate supplies of petroleum to make up for any shortfall in domestic output. At one time the United States was self-sufficient in oil production but, as that fortunate era drew to a close in the years after World War II, American leaders concluded that it was necessary to ensure that the country controlled an alternative, overseas source - and the Persian Gulf (with two-thirds of the world's known petroleum reserves) was selected for this purpose. Because the Gulf area is inherently unstable for a variety of historical, demographic, and political reasons, it has long been American policy to rely on military force to protect U.S. access to the region's energy supplies. The Iraq War is only the most recent of a series of U.S. military interventions intended to achieve this objective.

When the Bush administration took office in January 2001 and conducted a thoroughgoing review of U.S. energy policy, it could have chosen to begin the shift from a petroleum-based economy to one based on alternative, climate-friendly fuels. Instead, it chose to reaffirm the nation's reliance on petroleum and other fossil fuels, a decision embedded in the *National Energy Policy* of May 17, 2001. Once having made that decision, the

administration also committed the nation to increased reliance on the Persian Gulf - and, therefore, to greater reliance on the use of military force to ensure access to the Gulf's oil supplies. Because Saddam Hussein was seen in Washington as an impediment to such access, it ultimately became U.S. policy to remove him.

In the end, therefore, the Iraq War is the natural result of a White House effort to perpetuate the nation's addiction to petroleum at any cost - an addiction that is responsible for an ever-increasing outflow of climate-altering greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Bangladesh

But the war also has other, more direct effects on climate change.

Among other things, the war *itself* is producing enormous amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Because U.S. forces in Iraq are so reliant on combat planes, helicopters, and armored vehicles to conduct basic operations, they are using, on average, 16 gallons of oil per soldier per day - four times as much as soldiers in Operation Desert Storm and 16 times as much as those of World War II. Add up all the U.S. soldiers and sailors in Iraq and neighboring countries and aboard U.S. ships in the Gulf, and this works out to about 3 million gallons per day - equivalent to daily consumption by the entire population of Bangladesh. To this must be added the carbon dioxide released by pipeline and refinery explosions, the aircraft used to ferry U.S. troops in and out of Iraq, and other war-related activities.

The war's biggest impact, however, will probably lie in all the money spent on fighting the war that will never be available to address the climate change dilemma. According to the most recent **calculation** by the National Priorities Project, the United States has already spent \$475 billion on the war, with another \$155 billion in supplemental funding pending before Congress. But even these prodigious sums do not include the hundreds of billions that must be added for the care of wounded and traumatized veterans of the war, interest on the Iraqi war debt, and the replacement of damaged or destroyed weapons and military hardware - expenses which will surely push the combined total well over \$2 trillion (as Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes have **estimated**), and probably much higher.

Compare this with the \$1.5 billion earmarked by the administration in 2007 for the development of alternative, climate-friendly fuels. Let's be realistic, folks: At this rate of investment, the planet will be an uninhabitable desert long before any real progress has been made in replacing fossil fuels on a meaningful scale. The administration might argue that it is possible to raise that amount substantially and *still* increase spending on the war, but this would quite correctly be viewed as economic lunacy. As long as we commit these grotesque sums on the Iraq war, *there is no hope* of devoting adequate funds to tackling the problem of climate change in this country.

Borrowing from the Future

But it gets worse from there. The administration is not really paying for the war in Iraq from existing funds - for example, from taxes on all the new wealth accumulated by the richest Americans during the Bush era. Rather, it is borrowing money to pay for the war. These debts will come due in the decades ahead when the cost of adjusting to global warming will *really* begin to mount. But when those days arrive, our descendants will need to devote all their tax contributions to paying off the Bushies' war debt, not to addressing the increasingly severe effects of climate change. No doubt some will say, "Who are the culprits? Who is responsible for our desperate situation? Why didn't they do time behind bars? But by then, it will be too late.

So the Iraq War, for all its distinctive features, has to be seen in relation to the massive catastrophe of global climate change that is coming toward us at a terrifying pace. Like the peril of all-out nuclear war, this will constitute an ultimate threat to our nation's survival. If we had any sense at all, we would terminate the war as rapidly as possible, reject all war-related supplemental funding requests, dramatically cut our reliance on petroleum, and transfer massive funds from Iraq War accounts to research on alternative energy systems.

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Professor Klare has written widely on U.S. defense policy, the arms trade, and world security affairs. He is the author of: *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum* (Metropolitan Books, 2004); *Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict* (Metropolitan Books, 2001); *Rogue States and Nuclear Outlaws* (Hill and Wang, 1995); *American Arms Supermarket* (University of Texas Press, 1984); *Supplying Repression* (Field Foundation, 1978; 2nd ed., Institute for Policy Studies, 1981); and *War Without End: American Planning for the Next Vietnams* (Knopf, 1974). In addition, he is the editor or co-editor of *Light Weapons and Civil Conflict: Controlling the Tools of Violence* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999); *World Security: Challenges for a New Century* (1st edition, 1991; 2nd edition, 1994; 3rd edition, 1998); *Peace and World Security Studies: A Curriculum Guide* (5th edition, 1989; 6th edition, 1994); *Lethal Commerce: The Global Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995); and *Low-Intensity Warfare* (Pantheon, 1988). Professor Klare is also the defense correspondent of *The Nation*, a Contributing Editor of *Current History*. He has contributed articles to the two aforementioned journals and to *Arms Control Today*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Harper's*, *International Security*, *Issues in Science and Technology*, *Journal of International Affairs*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Mother Jones*, *Scientific American*, *Technology Review*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *World Policy Journal*.

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