No one can deny that the United States military has recently done mind-boggling work. On very short notice from the Commander-in-Chief and with few directives saved to adjust, our armed forces took on Iraq—a country with a military machine honed to the edge by eight years of war, a land mass twice the size of Idaho, a gross national product equal to that of Kentucky, a population of 18 million people (only 10% smaller than the New York metropolitan area’s) and a spunky, youthful population at that (45% aged 15 or less). Using smart weapons—80% of the electronics for which our military leaders were so smugly entitled to purchase from the Japanese—and backed only by Great Britain, France, Germany, and a handful of other experienced warrior titans, our military creamed them, killing roughly 100,000 Iraqi soldiers in record time and bringing what American reporters learned to call "collateral damage" (formerly known as death) to perhaps another 25,000 to 50,000 civilians in only six weeks.

Despite the failure to get Saddam Hussein himself—the one Iraqi we know of who richly deserved to die—this was an important victory because two-thirds of the world's known reserves of oil lie beneath five countries: Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Oil, everyone knows, is uniquely important to our well being because it undergirds our fastest-growing industry, which has been the rising star of Wall Street throughout the 1980s at a time when other Wall Street stars have mostly ended up behind bars. With the S&L industry crumbling at a cost to taxpayers of $500 to $1000 billion, with the nation's banking system failing at unprecendented rates (the First U.S. Bank, Citicorp was bailed out in the middle of the war by a Saudi prince who loaned the bank $590 million at 11% interest), with the insurance industry on the ropes, with Ford and GM suffering the largest losses ever recorded, with people saying that America's industrial and political leaders are too busy lining their own pockets to provide the nation with (a) an educational system that could improve upon our present 25% illiteracy rate, (b) an affordable health-care system for the steadily-growing numbers of people debilitated by asthma, cancer and a host of other modern diseases, (c) housing for hundreds of thousands of homeless, and so on—it's important to have at least one 100%-American industry growing as strongly as a toadstool in manure. It provides a shining star of hope in an otherwise overcast firmament. In the U.S., we (meaning private industry, plus government at all levels) now spend $90 billion per year on end-of-pipe pollution controls. It's our proudest growth industry. If we didn't have oil, we'd be forced to shift to alternative energy sources that are much more difficult to control politically, such as sunlight and hydrogen fuels derived from water, and which wouldn't support anything like our present-day mushrooming end-of-pipe pollution-control enterprise.

There are other benefits from oil as well. Besides providing each of our metropolitan areas with a protective blanket of brown smog (giving the medical community at least 10% billion in income each year), the oil production of the U.S. has helped bring large public works projects (dams and concrete channels) will be required to transport water from deluged northern regions to parched southern regions. Fortunately, Bechtel, Brown & Root, and other American construction giants—fresh from the task of rebuilding Kuwait and Iraq for an estimated $100 to $200 billion—will be able to hire armies of unemployed former farmers and homeless crack addicts to complete the desperately-needed water projects, for which we will all naturally be required to ante up.

It must be clear to even the most hardened pacifist that the many benefits of oil are certainly worth waging war for whenever an opportunity presents itself. It would even be worth manufacturing an opportunity or two, like escalating a serious but entirely local border dispute into a raging conflagration. Thankfully, our recent success in the Middle East carries with it nearly zero danger that political stability will be achieved between the haves and the have-nots in the region, so we'll doubtless be able to develop other opportunities to defend our oil supplies again before too long.

Happily, the cheap, readily-available alternative to oil is unthinkable in the present political climate: a faint-hearted reduction in our per-capita energy consumption by culling our buildings to prevent heat loss; by adopting unmanly cars that get 45 miles per gallon; by refurbishing anti-individualistic trolley systems that transported people in (and between) U.S. cities in the 1920s until General Motors and Goodyear Tire generously bought them up and dismantled them; by retrieving backward to embrace has-been, weak technologies like railroads instead of modern, brawny trucks.

No, there's little danger that these effeminate alternatives will be favored by the present administration. Commander-in-Chief Bush announced in the middle of the war that his national energy strategy had only one key plank: more deep drilling to find and develop more oil fields off the coasts of Maine, New Jersey, Florida, California and, best of all, in Alaska's prized Arctic Wildlife Refuge—to pump, pump and then pump some more. An energy platform strictly for real men--oil men doing what oil men do best—really putting it to America.

When we started this discussion based on the military's most recent success, we didn't mean to imply that their contribution to America's industrial growth has been limited to recent months. Over the years, they've played a key role creating the need for a pollution control industry, but until now no one has ever cataloged their contribution to the flowering of this new line of work: inventing the ultimate technical gizmo to capture pollution after it's been created (a modern search for the Holy Grail), new ways of packaging pollution for public acceptance (the double-lined state-of-the-art landfill was the first, soon to be followed by the doubletriple-scrubber incinerator with its very own ash monofil), and, of course, all of this creating a need for a vast army of "site remediation specialists"—chemical dump cleanup jockeys. Ability to read and write not mandatory. An equal opportunity employer.

The military establishment is by far the biggest contributor to pollution in America, far outstripping anything that private industry can point to in the way of creating cleanup opportunities. Now, finally, a new report has been issued by the National Toxic Campaign Fund entitled, The U.S. Military's Toxic Legacy: America's Worst Environmental Enemy. This important new report details "15,000 points of blight"—enough to make the Commander-in-Chief swell with pride as he reflects on the need for an equal number of "points of light" to confront these military leftovers. Actually, there are only 1579 contaminated military bases containing only 14,401 individual contaminated sites, ranging from jet fuel puddles floating on underground drinking water supplies to patches of spilled plutonium covered over (and covered up) by neglected and forgotten concrete slabs now crumbling in the woods. They'll cost taxpayers an estimated $100 to $200 billion to clean up. But this report just details domestic military creations—the many overseas contributions made by our military remain to be cataloged...
appreciatively another time. (More on this important new report in future.)


--Peter Montague

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Descriptor terms: persian gulf; petroleum industry; military toxics; drilling;