

Comment: *The First of the Resource Wars?*

So invading Iraq was about oil after all! — at least according to the UK government's former chief scientific adviser, Sir David King, in his Darwin Day's lecture to the British Humanist Association in London on February 11.

Admittedly he is something of a maverick. A South African, born in 1939, David King, as an anti-apartheid activist in his student days at Witwatersrand University, was interrogated by the police, accused of being a communist. In 1963 he moved to England. He taught physical chemistry at the University of Liverpool, then at Cambridge, where he served as Master of Downing College, before becoming the government's chief scientific officer in the year 2000. He advised on a range of highly sensitive issues, including genetically modified foods, stem cell research, nuclear power, and foot-and-mouth disease (in favour of all but the last, when he did not expect seven million animals to be slaughtered). Most famously he said that climate change is the most severe problem facing us today — 'more serious even than the threat of terrorism'. For saying this he was comprehensively rubbished by senior officials in the Bush administration.

Now he is saying that the Iraq war was just the first of this century's 'resource wars'. In the lecture he predicted that with population growth, natural resources dwindling, seas rising because of climate change, and so on, the squeeze on the planet will lead to more conflict. 'I'm going to suggest that future historians might look back on our particular recent past and see the Iraq war as the first of the conflicts of this kind – the first of the resource wars'. It doesn't need revelation or rocket science to see that. There will be — already is! — a shortage of essential minerals, of water, of fertile land: 'Unless we get to grips with this problem globally, we potentially are going to lead ourselves into a situation where large, powerful nations will secure the resources for their own people at the expense of others'. What else (one wonders) have powerful nations ever done, since the Romans needed wheat to supply the masses with bread?

In the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 David King was advising the then prime minister Tony Blair. Going to war, however, was not a matter on which he was consulted. He takes it for granted that we all agree that the case for going to war to remove

the threat of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction was nonsense. He says that the US was concerned about energy security and supply because of its reliance on foreign oil from unstable states. 'Casting its eye around the world – there was Iraq' (the third largest oil reserves in the world, so they say). He had no occasion to express his view of the true reason for the invasion to Tony Blair: 'It was certainly the view that I held at the time, and I think it is fair to say a view that quite a few people in government held at the time' — namely that getting control of Middle East oil was the motivation.

One interesting question is why we could not have been told the truth from the start. When invading another country, it's perhaps considered polite, in international circles, to assert some reason other than seizing their property, such as self-defence (remember the 45 minutes it would take for missiles to hit British troops in Cyprus?) or liberating an oppressed people. Actually, the US government could easily have explained that in order to maintain Western civilization as we know it we needed access to Iraqi oil, and would have to depose a vile dictator in the process. Had the public been advised that, without such action, our standard of living was under threat, the invasion would surely have been granted widespread support. We surely need to get ahead of the Russians, Chinese and Indians in the competition for the remaining resources. But why did our governments keep denying that we were after the oil reserves (concocting the absurd WMD story as a cover for the 'shock and awe')? — unless perhaps because even to suggest that oil was such an issue would have thrown the markets, and the public, into an uncontrollable panic — leading perhaps to widespread social disruption?

Worse still, Saddam Hussein might have been succeeded by a radical Islamist regime — as in neighbouring Iran. Of course the botched aftermath of the invasion of Iraq seems only to have greatly strengthened the position of Iran. Consistency in these geopolitical matters is not easily achievable by leaders as transitory as ours. Presumably the long awaited public inquiry into the origins of the invasion will confirm that many people in government circles were against it all along. Why they had no effect, and why we were not told the truth, are questions never likely to be answered — any more than the question about the justice and legality of the whole enterprise (if that is still a question).

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