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## The End of Oil?

By MICHAEL HIRSH

Oil is the curse of the modern world; it is “the devil’s excrement,” in the words of the former Venezuelan oil minister Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, who is considered to be the father of [OPEC](#) and should know. Our insatiable need for oil has brought us [global warming](#), Islamic fundamentalism and environmental depredation. It has turned the United States and China, the world’s biggest consumers of petroleum, into greedy, irresponsible addicts that can’t see beyond their next fix. With a few exceptions, like Norway and the United Arab Emirates, oil doesn’t even benefit the nations from which it is extracted. On the contrary: Most oil-rich states have been doomed to a seemingly permanent condition of kleptocracy by a few, poverty for the rest, chronic backwardness and, worst of all, the loss of a national soul.

We can’t be rid of the stuff soon enough.

Such is the message of Peter Maass’s slender but powerfully written new book, “Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil.” Unquestionably, by fueling better and faster transportation and powering cities and factories, oil has been critical to modern economies. But oil has also made possible the most destructive wars in history, and it has left human society in a historical cul-de-sac. Despite much hue and cry today, Maass argues, we seem unable to move beyond an oil-based global economy, and we are going to hit a wall soon.

Maass, a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine, tends to endorse the predictions of industry skeptics like Matthew Simmons, who argues the earth is about to surpass “peak oil” supplies. Even with the recent fallback in prices, the petroleum that’s left to discover will be harder and more expensive to extract. Last year’s \$147-a-barrel oil was just a “foretaste of what awaits us,” Maass writes.

Maass is less interested in crunching oil-supply numbers, however, than in exposing the cruelty and soullessness of humankind’s lust for this “violence-inducing intoxicant,” as he calls it. His book teaches us an old lesson anew: that the true wealth of nations is not discovered in the ground, but created by the ingenuity and sweat of citizens. It’s the same lesson the Spanish learned centuries ago when they discovered gold, the oil of their time, in the New World. They piled up bullion but squandered it on imperial fantasies and failed to build enduring prosperity, while destroying the civilizations from which they seized it.

Destruction, or at least a lack of progress, has been the fate of most of the nations unlucky enough to sit on top of large pools of “black gold” today. They have grown corrupted by it, their leaders relieved of the need

### CRUDE WORLD

#### The Violent Twilight of Oil

By Peter Maass

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to show accountability as long as they can buy off well-connected foreigners and pay for the security and protection they need from their own angry, disenfranchised citizens. In starkly titled chapters — “Fear,” “Greed,” “Empire,” “Alienation” and so on — Maass shows how each oil state has found its own way to failure. “Just as every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way, every dysfunctional oil country is dysfunctional in its own way,” he writes.

Equatorial Guinea’s savage leader, Teodoro Obiang, plunders virtually every cent of his nation’s wealth, aided by Riggs Bank of Washington, which sometimes sent employees to the embassy to pick up bulging suitcases of cash. Locals don’t even get the benefit of jobs because the manual labor is supplied by Indians and Filipinos brought in by [Marathon Oil](#). Walking around the capital, Malabo, one night, Maass does manage to find a booming source of local employment: young Guinean girls called “night fighters” because they jostle for a chance to sell their bodies to the oilmen from Texas or Oklahoma. “The men in Malabo might not find jobs in the oil industry, but it is clearly possible for their desperate sisters to earn a few dollars,” he writes. Traveling to Ecuador, Maass discovers graffiti on one of the pipelines that cut through what was once pristine Amazonian [rain forest](#): “Más Petróleo = Más Pobreza.” More oil equals more poverty. For him, it sums up the confiscatory approach that Texaco took to that country, leaving it a stripped land oozing with toxic pollutants.

The major oil producing nations have fared little better. Seventy years after the discovery of its first great reservoir, Saudi Arabia remains a medieval principality with a bare patina of modernity. The country’s long reign as the world’s No. 1 oil supplier has been good for the Saudi princes but a Faustian bargain for the rest of us, having led to the petrodollar-funded spread of extremism and the rise of [Osama bin Laden](#). Post-Soviet Russia has become a kind of petro-fascist state where the head of [Lukoil](#) slavishly keeps a picture of [Vladimir Putin](#) on his desk rather than photos of his family. Venezuela is resurrecting socialism, this time as farce, under the buffoonish [Hugo Chávez](#), who hosts a TV talk show called “Aló Presidente” while turning his national oil company into a “development agency with oil wells” that furthers his hold on power. Iran’s whole modern history has been twisted out of shape by its oil riches, starting with the American-British coup that toppled Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 and restored Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

The unhappiest countries are those where oil has led to war, none more so than Iraq, even if no one will acknowledge the truth about America’s 2003 invasion. “The refining process transforms this black swill into a clear fluid without which our civilization would collapse,” Maass writes. “Quite often a corollary process of political refining occurs to sanitize the truth of what’s done to keep oil in the hands of friendly governments. Just as cars cannot run on unrefined crude, political systems choke at the unfiltered mention of war for oil.” He cites [George W. Bush](#)’s claims that the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with oil. Still, the question hangs out there: Why was the Oil Ministry one of the only places guarded by United States troops in the early days of looting?

By the end of Maass’s long indictment, one wants the horror to end. Let’s all move on from oil already. Indeed, it is tempting to imagine what sort of globalization we might have today if Max Steineke and his exploratory team from Standard Oil of California hadn’t discovered quite so much petroleum when they pierced Saudi Arabia’s first great reservoir in 1938. If less human ingenuity had been applied to finding oil over the last 70 years, and more to developing other sources of energy, the world economy — and the

environment — might be far healthier. The World Trade Center might even still be standing.

But Maass doesn't fully deliver on the promise of his subtitle. Is this really the twilight of the oil economy? We still seem utterly drenched in the gunk, and the author's occasional hints at the alternative history that might have been — if only [Ronald Reagan](#) hadn't dismantled those solar panels that [Jimmy Carter](#) put on the White House roof! — are not terribly satisfying. He says that the combined technologies exist to move beyond oil, but he doesn't go into any real detail. In his final chapter, Maass gives us an evocative glimpse of one future alternative he would prefer — a giant wind farm he discovers along Interstate 10 in California. “Set against the blue sky and the brown desert, in rows of rotating white arms that glint in the sun, the turbines have the appearance of futuristic totems waving at us, luring us forward,” Maass observes, before driving on in his car.

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