



Oil and War Mix. Having the former has meant winning the latter

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The definitive history of the role of oil in modern warfare has not been written, but a lot can be learned from Robert Zubrin's new book, "Energy Victory."

"For nearly a century," Zubrin writes, "control of oil has been the decisive factor determining victory or defeat in the struggle for world dominance." That was true in World War I and World War II. Zubrin believes oil will be pivotal in the global conflict now underway as well.

In 1914, the United States was responsible for 67 percent of worldwide oil production. When war broke out in Europe, the Germans used U-boats in an attempt to stop America from sending oil to France and Britain. Worried that he would not have enough fuel for the trucks needed to move his troops, French

Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau declared: "Gasoline is as vital as blood in the coming battles."

President Woodrow Wilson did manage to get American oil convoys safely across the Atlantic. "The crack German infantry were as tough as they come," Zubrin writes, "but there was no way they could cope with a new army equipped with fleets of rampaging gasoline-powered land battleships and assisted by unmatched swarms of fighter aircraft." At a victory banquet in London on Nov. 18, 1918, Lord Curzon declared: "The Allied cause had floated to victory upon a wave of oil."

Hitler learned from the Kaiser's mistakes. A few decades later he had tanks - Panzers, in need of large quantities of fuel to blitz France, Poland and other corners of Europe.

Nazi fuel requirements expanded further following the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. With that in mind, the Germans set their sights on Baku, the heart of the Soviet oil industry. "Unless we get the Baku oil," Hitler said, "the war is lost." They didn't and it was.

Erwin Rommel's fabled Afrika Korps was crippled by fuel shortages and prevented by Allied troops from capturing the then-underutilized oil fields of the Middle East. By 1944, Zubrin recounts, though the Nazis produced tens of thousands of aircraft and tanks, "they were nearly all useless due to lack of fuel."

In the Battle of the Bulge, thirst for oil led the Nazis to try to capture American gasoline supplies in eastern Belgium. A Panzer assault was foiled when American soldiers blew up bridges and set drums of oil ablaze to create a screen of fire and smoke. Before long, the Panzers literally ran out of gas. American aircraft destroyed them where they parked.

Oil was no less pivotal in the Pacific theater. In the 1930s, the growing Japanese empire was in dire need of petroleum resources, the closest of which were in Southeast Asia. When the Japanese invaded Indochina, the U.S. responded by declaring an oil embargo against Japan.

After Pearl Harbor, American submarines in the Pacific made Japanese oil tankers their priority, second only to aircraft carriers. Fuel shortages prevented Japan from

training pilots adequately. One result, Zubrin says, was the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" in which the Japanese lost 273 planes. The U.S. lost 29. The reason the Americans prevailed in the crucial Battle of Leyte Gulf -- despite the Japanese battleships' "hundredfold advantage in firepower and armor" over the screen of destroyers protecting the U.S. troopships -- appears to have been that the imperial fleet ran short of fuel.

Since World War II, oil production has increasingly shifted to the Middle East. Today, Iran's oil wealth is being used to finance terrorism and build nuclear weapons (whatever the most recent intelligence estimate claims). Arabia's oil is being used to spread the Saudis' supremacist and virulently anti-Western ideology. We give the Islamists money; they give us petroleum -- and Osama bin Laden, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hezbollah, Hamas and the hijackers of 9/11. Some bargain.

The problem is we can use nothing but oil to fill the tanks of our cars and trucks. The solution is diversity -- creating a variety of fuel choices. The quickest way to achieve that, Zubrin argues, is simply by mandating that all new cars be Flexible Fuel Vehicles. Entrepreneurs will then compete feverishly to make alternative fuels available.

The definitive history of the role of oil in modern warfare has not been written. But then, we don't yet know how the story ends. We do know this: Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Islamism and terrorism

have proliferated, as has America's dependence on a uniquely strategic commodity controlled by regimes whose ultimate goal is "Death to

America!" Few of our elected leaders appear to grasp this. Fewer still have proposed any serious steps in response.

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