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The United States of oil

No administration has ever been more in bed with the energy industry -- but does that mean Big Oil is calling Bush's shots? First of two parts.

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The Bush administration's ties to oil and gas are as deep as an offshore well. President George W. Bush's family has been running oil companies since 1950. Vice President Dick Cheney spent the late '90s as CEO of Halliburton, the world's largest oil services company. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice sat on the board of Chevron, (<http://www.chevron.com/about/annual/directors/main.html>) which graced a tanker with her name. Commerce Secretary Donald Evans was the CEO of Tom Brown Inc. — a natural gas company with fields in Texas, Colorado and Wyoming — for more than a decade.

The links don't end with personnel. The bin Laden family and other members of Saudi Arabia's oil-wealthy elite have contributed mightily to several Bush family ventures, even as the American energy industry helped put Bush in office. Of the top 10 lifetime contributors to George W.'s war chests, six either come from the oil business or have ties to it, according the Center for Public Integrity.

"There's no denying that this is an oil administration," says Peter Eisner, managing director of the nonprofit, nonpartisan watchdog group that conducted the study of Bush's campaign finances. "You can't talk about the career of any George Bush — father or son — without talking about oil."

But talking is one thing; determining exactly how the ties to the oil industry affect domestic and foreign policy is another. How much influence does the oil industry have? Is the U.S. bombing Afghanistan in part because — as antiwar critics have claimed — the industry wants to clear a path for oil and gas pipelines (/tech/feature/2001/10/29/central_asian_oil/index.html)? Will the Bush administration steadfastly avoid confrontation with Saudi Arabia — home of 15 of the 19 suspected hijackers — because it doesn't want to upset ExxonMobil and the other oil companies with a deep Saudi stake? Or, even more intriguingly, could the close ties between Bush and the Saudis lead to increased U.S. pressure on Israel to create a peace settlement?

Or is this too simplistic? Since at least World War II, the oil industry has often been forced by the U.S. government to serve foreign policy objectives, rather than the other way around. Presidents have generally accepted oil's economic significance, its role as the grease that makes capitalism go. But even the most conservative administrations have regularly emphasized geopolitical objectives — Soviet containment, for example — at the expense of oil industry interests. Aspects of Bush's energy plan suggest that even this administration will not break the give-and-take pattern.

The problem, however, is that this pattern, the so-called "cheap oil strategy" looks more and more like a failure. Foreign oil dependence has risen over the past decade while now — with anti-American sentiment growing in the Arab world — foreign oil supplies are looking increasingly insecure. More than ever, some kind of national policy pushing both conservation and the

development of renewable energy resources seems eminently prudent, if not necessary.

And that's where the current makeup of the Bush administration becomes crucial — not because Bush-Cheney and company plan to invade Iraq to make it safe for ExxonMobil, (although that's not totally beyond the bounds of possibility) but because these are the last men and women in the world to expect radical change from on questions related to energy. Their friends, finances, and worldviews are all oil-drenched.

George W.'s ties to oil don't prove that the industry decides our every foreign policy move. But they do just about guarantee, for all practical purposes, that nothing significant will change in American energy policy. With Bush-Cheney in power, oil addiction is here to stay.

The fusion of oil and politics is a Bush family tradition. For generations, the Bushes and their friends have been shuttling back and forth between energy industry boardrooms and Washington's hallowed halls.

Bush's grandfather, Prescott Bush, initiated the pattern. Shortly before winning a Connecticut Senate seat in 1952 he helped his son George raise \$350,000 to start what would become Zapata Petroleum.

Sen. Bush also regularly looked out for the oil industry and his son's interests while in Washington. His biggest single favor, according to Herbert Parmet's book "George Bush: The Life of a Lone Star Yankee," came a year into his first Senate term, when he opposed legislation that would have federalized offshore resources — including oil — to raise money for education. In the name of states' rights and free enterprise, the bill's defeat helped both the oil companies and gave Zapata just what it needed to expand. In fact, soon after the legislation failed, Zapata moved into offshore drilling — eventually one of Zapata's most lucrative ventures

George Bush made millions during the '50s and '60s Texas oil boom, and he also made many friends, most notably James Baker, who became Bush's company lawyer in 1963 after Zapata merged with Penn to become Pennzoil.

Bush later brought his friends to Washington, first as a representative in the House, then as head of the Republican National Committee and finally as vice president and president. He didn't stock his administration as full of oilmen and women as his son has, but like Prescott Bush, he didn't mind doing the industry's bidding either. His most public act for oil came in 1981. While serving as Ronald Reagan's vice president, he departed from the White House's official stance and visited Saudi Arabia to plead for an end to sliding prices. Bush argued that he was simply trying to protect American security interests by protecting domestic producers, who have higher costs than their Persian Gulf counterparts. But higher prices had another benefit: by protecting domestic oil jobs, they helped shore up support in Texas for what would eventually become his successful 1988 presidential campaign.

Higher prices also directly helped Bush's son, George W. Bush. George W.'s oil career started in 1978 — 12 years after his father first entered Congress — when several of his father's friends invested in his firm, Arbusto ("Bush" in Spanish). Unlike his father, George W. spent much of his oil career in the red. As Joe Conason pointed out (http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1111/1797_300/59086099/p1/article.html) in Harper's last year before the election, the company's original investors and others bailed out his firm at least three times. But after a final act of corporate CPR — a merger with Harken Energy in 1986 — Bush's connections to power really paid off. Two years after the merger, Abdullah Taha Bakhsh, a former director of Saudi Arabia's income tax department, purchased an 11 percent stake in Harken through his company Traco International. That same year, Harken won a contract for oil-drilling in Bahrain.

"Harken had no international experience at the time," says Eisner at the Center for Public Integrity, which published a detailed account of Bush's rise to power titled "The Buying of the President: 2000." "It was their first out of country contract."

Press reports at the time questioned Bahrain's motivations. Even the normally reserved Wall Street Journal reported in 1991 that the contract "raises the question of ... an effort to cozy up to a presidential son."

The Bush family countered that the contract was well deserved. Regardless, the deal in the Persian Gulf gave Bush a direct tie to the Saudi elite and set Bush on a suddenly successful path.

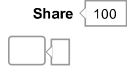
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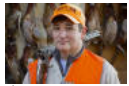
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John Trudell: A Personal Remembrance

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cynthia-dagnalmyron/rip-brother-john-trudell_b_8763952.html?utm_hp_ref=entertainment&ir=Entertainment)

A 'Star Wars' Plot Hole's Hilarious Solution Actually Makes Sense

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/12/09/star-wars-plot-hole-hilarious-solution_n_8776538.html?utm_hp_ref=entertainment&ir=Entertainment)

These Are The Best Movies To Watch When You Need An Ugly Cry

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/12/10/best-movies-cry_n_8776296.html?utm_hp_ref=entertainment&ir=Entertainment)

Nicki Minaj Calls Donald Trump's Campaign 'The Ultimate Reality Show'

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/12/10/nicki-minaj-billboard-trump_n_8776292.html?utm_hp_ref=entertainment&ir=Entertainment)

Blair Gilley Releases Most Personal Album Yet With 'If It's Just For Tonight'

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brittany-hodak/blair-gilley-releases-mos_b_8771408.html?utm_hp_ref=entertainment&ir=Entertainment)

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