

Seth,

You are, of course right that it would be absurd to claim that USFP combats the interests of economic elites. Now, it might seem to follow that because it is absurd that's why no one is saying this. But this is clearly not the reason. For consider another claim along similar lines: USFP serves the interests of U.S. people, broadly defined. It seems to me that there are lots who are making this claim. In fact, it would be heretical in most mainstream circles to suggest otherwise.

But of course, I don't need to tell you that it's an absurd claim: Our three trillion dollar plus venture in Iraq-which killed 5,000 and maimed 17 times that number was a grotesque waste of lives and revenue which might have been devoted to the single thing which could have saved the planet-the conversion to a renewable energy economy. So it's pretty obvious that whoever's interest USFP acts in, it is not serving those of the population at large.

That is the fundamental fact to keep one's eye on and while I appreciate your pointing these out, its important not to let the complexities of which elites (if any) are benefitting from a given foreign policy, to obscure this basic underlying bottom line.

By way of analogy, consider the following: while I have no idea of which corporations and plutocrats successfully lobbied for which tax breaks, I'm fairly confident that the deliberations of the Senate Ways and Means committee on tax policy will almost certainly benefit elites, more precisely, the major donors to the campaigns of the committee members (as luridly demonstrated by Bartlett and Steele). So too will the Senate Foreign Relations committee and the National Security Council or State Department show itself to be equally solicitous to those who are, among other things, able to contribute substantially to campaigns, (though their influence is not limited to this channel). Just as there are many corporations clamoring for lots of different tax breaks and the ultimate legislative result a complex stew of compromises, so too will the same chaotic situation operating within relatively narrow constraints be visible in foreign policy outcomes.

That's what the examples you cite seem to indicate: no one may be able to lay out the chain of influence to action. There are occasional clear cases, but these will be the exception. Incidentally, among these, there is one which did stick out which is that while I have no idea what Google's interest in Afghanistan that seems to me a misleading question: there is another sector of the economy which is likely to have substantial interest in Afghanistan and the Middle East, namely, the fossil fuel/extractive industries. I haven't read Steve Coll's book on the subject, but I did read some reviews which indicated that Coll's basic point is that while the oil companies will not necessarily always get exactly what they want, they are pretty certain never to get what they don't want. In this case, what they don't want would be certain forms of radical nationalism which they find untenable.

Again, how this works out in detail is, I am sure, enormously complex, but we shouldn't allow the complexity to obscure the broad outlines and the field of possible outcomes which is narrowly constrained by patterns of elite influence. In short, to return to a well worn example, would we have invaded Iraq if its chief export were turnips? Almost certainly not. But it does not follow from this that anyone can show precisely why we did so. Nor should the fact that it's hard to do so be taken as an indication that economic motives, specifically, the concerns of economic elites, are not primary factors in foreign policy decisions. To return to the Ways and Means committee, just because we can't show how a particular favor in the tax code came into being doesn't mean that the system isn't set up to, on balance, reward elites and punish the majority-as it almost always does in the absence of serious popular mobilization exerting pressure.

One final point: it doesn't follow that we shouldn't make every effort to connect the dots and, insofar as I sympathize with your (apparent) rejection of the revisionist cold war critique, it is on the grounds that left scholarship has not always done a good enough job in this regard. As I mentioned in my FB note to Rick, unfortunately, I agree with some of Wilentz's critique of Zinn and Stone and Kuznick along those lines. But it's a big (reactionary) step to go from criticizing how the job has been done by the left to writing off the critique itself. That's what Wilentz is doing and I hope you're not doing it too.

John