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U.N. Ambassador's Oily Past

Phyllis Bennis**January 08, 2007**

Phyllis Bennis is a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington and of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. Her most recent book is [Challenging Empire: How People, Governments and the U.N. Defy U.S. Power](#).

The transfer of current U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad from his job as the Great Wizard of Iraq's embattled Emerald City in Baghdad's Green Zone, to the quieter but no less complicated halls of the United Nations, may have several rationales.

One reason may be a belated Bush administration recognition that Khalilzad's favored strategy of demanding that Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government "reach out" to Iraq's angry Sunni community has failed to quell the violence. (It is unlikely, however, that anyone in the administration acknowledges that no strategy will work as long as the U.S. occupation continues.) Another may be based on an overdue recognition that sending a Sunni Afghan-born envoy who speaks several regional languages means little, when that diplomat still represents policies of war and occupation across the region.

But sending Khalilzad to the United Nations clearly indicates that the White House, however ideologically committed to unilateralism and the unbridled assertion of military power, still need the U.N. Zalmay Khalilzad's history—with U.S. policies in Central Asia, Afghanistan, oil, the Bush family—goes back many years, and he remains a key defender of those policies. He served in key Cold War positions in both the Reagan and Bush Senior administrations, mostly having to do with the 1980s anti-Soviet contra war in Afghanistan as well as the Iran-Iraq War of the same period. In both cases he distinguished himself by backing regimes that would only later be identified as part of the so-called axis of evil: Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It was in Afghanistan that he made the biggest splash. He had been an early supporter of the Taliban during the brutal internecine fighting that accompanied the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. And he remained in touch with the fundamentalist forces after they trounced opposing warlords and took power in Kabul in 1996. By 1997, [according to the Washington Post](#):

...at a luxury Houston hotel, oil company adviser Zalmay Khalilzad was chatting pleasantly over dinner with leaders of Afghanistan's Taliban regime about their shared enthusiasm for a proposed multibillion-dollar pipeline deal.

Khalilzad, a hardcore neoconservative protégé of Dick Cheney and member of the Project for a New American Century, was working as a risk assessor for Unocal oil company, which was then debating the viability of a natural gas pipeline project in Afghanistan. The Taliban had no official diplomatic relations with the U.S., but Unocal flew Taliban ministers to Texas and flew their own corporate officials to Afghanistan for negotiations. No one in Texas and few in Washington had anything to say then about the Taliban's treatment of women, its imposition of harsh medieval laws mandating punishments of amputation and death by stoning, its destruction of Afghanistan's rich cultural heritage or its denial of health care and education.

As the respected World Press Review pointed out, the "United States was slow to condemn the Taliban in the mid-1990s because the Taliban seemed to favor U.S. oil company Unocal to build two pipelines across Afghanistan."

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That included Zalmay Khalilzad. Writing on October 7, 1996, just as the Taliban was sweeping to victory in Afghanistan's civil war and five years to the day before his future boss George W. Bush would launch a massive war against Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, Khalilzad said:

the Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran. We should ... be willing to offer recognition and humanitarian assistance and to promote international economic reconstruction... It is time for the United States to re-engage [the Taliban].

So after September 11, when the Bush administration was determined to go to war against Afghanistan, concern remained about how to protect U.S. economic—read: oil—interests in the area. In 1998 Halliburton CEO Dick Cheney [had told oil executives](#) that “the current hot spots for major oil companies are the oil reserves in the Caspian Sea region.” So it was no surprise that the oilmen and oilwomen of the Bush administration would continue their efforts to protect U.S. access to current and future oil and gas in the region, even as they launched a war against the country they had so recently hoped would become a giant oil transit hub for U.S. oil companies drilling there. As the Bush administration began casting around for the right person to protect those interests, Afghan national, oil expert and recent Taliban-backer Zalmay Khalilzad, by then on staff of the National Security Council and a special adviser to the president on Afghan policy, fit the bill admirably.

Two years earlier, even before 9/11, Khalilzad himself had urged the Bush administration to create “a military stalemate” in war-torn Afghanistan. Drafted as part of a major set of proposals for a new U.S. policy in Afghanistan, [Khalilzad went on to call on Bush to](#)

appoint a high-level envoy for Afghanistan who can coordinate overall U.S. policy. The envoy must have sufficient stature and access to ensure that he or she is taken seriously in foreign capitals and by local militias. Equally important, the special envoy must be able to shape Afghanistan policy within U.S. bureaucracies.

Two years later, on December 31, 2001, Khalilzad's appointment as special envoy to the new Afghan regime was announced. The White House announcement did not mention his history with Unocal. Nor did it repeat Dick Cheney's words about the importance of oil in the Central Asia/Caspian region. The Amarillo Globe-News, reporting on Cheney's 1998 speech, said the “potential for this region turning as volatile as the Persian Gulf, though, does not concern Cheney... ‘You've got to go where the oil is,’ [he said](#) . ‘I don't worry about it a lot.’”

That Bush administration tendency not to worry showed up in Khalilzad as well. Three months into the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the U.S.-backed president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, who also happened to be a former colleague of Khalilzad at Unocal, told the press he had not asked the United States for a bombing halt. Khalilzad, noting in Kabul at the same time that the U.S. bombing was causing civilian Afghan casualties, [said blithely](#) :

“you have to weigh the risks of ending the conflict prematurely with the costs of continuing it. I have no doubt, on balance, that we will continue until we achieve our goals... We do not target civilians, but civilians unfortunately do get affected, even killed,” Khalilzad went on. “War is a very imperfect business.”

It was a good lesson Khalilzad remembered when he moved on to his next war, in Iraq.