

is a potentially disastrous kind of inflexibility. Our carrier fleet was designed to fight in the open ocean against other blue-water navies. And yet this winter found half of all our carriers deployed in the Persian Gulf, where they operated in restrictive waterways against land targets. They adapted well, but one couldn't help but think of the *Vincennes* disaster, in which another capital ship designed to fight on the open ocean couldn't make the switch.

Because navies can go quietly over the horizon in ways armies can't, naval development presents a country with unique opportunities for going wrong. When a continental power like the United States disregards its natural defense barriers and builds big battle fleets, it has turned from geopolitical realities towards a troublesome kind of make-believe. This kind of navy exists only to defeat other navies that are similarly inclined. That's justifiable only if other navies like that already exist. (Modern history's best candidate for one is probably the Japanese navy from 1900 to 1945, although it's arguable that Japanese overseas ambitions were in part a response to our own previous expansions.) But what's troubling is that once the Mahanian turn is made it doesn't much matter if these other global navies exist.

Since the early 1950s, the United States Navy has

developed a force of big-deck aircraft carriers, half of them nuclear-powered, to protect us from an alleged Soviet naval expansionism that never quite materialized. It's true that in Brezhnev's heyday, the Soviets operated far from home waters out of a large facility in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, but this is more of the chicken-or-egg problem—we built the base there to support our overseas navy. Is the new generation of Soviet aircraft carriers sufficient reason to press forward with more of our own? No—they were built in response to our carriers, and they fall short anyway. The Soviets do operate the world's largest submarine navy, but since the best way to sink a submarine is with another submarine, that doesn't justify building more carriers either. And most of the other Soviet naval developments—the long range aircraft, the cruise missiles—are threats primarily because we have invested so heavily in the capital ships they target.

So great is the internal momentum of the big-fleet fixation that it has even taken the withering of the Soviet navy under Gorbachev completely in stride. Hagan notes that John Lehman has credited the Soviets' recent naval retrenchment to the carrier-based fleet buildup he spearheaded. But beware: A theory that is "confirmed" by all possible evidence is too good to be true.

Unsheik

The coming obsolescence of oil

by Gregg Easterbrook

I've got 20 bucks that says: One hundred years from now, petroleum will be worthless. Historically, many of the commodities that held dominant and seemingly indelible positions in world commerce during one century became afterthoughts to the century that followed. Bronze, salt, tea, dyes, cotton, coal, and rubber are among the items it once seemed humanity could not live without. Why did they fade? When a substance holds great value, there is enormous incentive to discover substitutes or invent alternatives. Petroleum, essential to world economies today, will fall to this progression in its turn, replaced by new fuels such as methane and pure

hydrogen, or whole new philosophies toward energy, such as collecting it from sunlight in space. That's why the Saudis are smart to be selling oil as fast as they can pump the stuff, rather than conserving it for their grandchildren. As the sands drift back over the Persian Gulf berms, future desert dwellers may be annoyed that their forefathers didn't sell even more when they had the chance.

But that is the shape of things to come. The shape of things in this, the century of oil, is the subject of Daniel Yergin's excellent book,* the timeliest work of nonfiction in many years. *The Prize* is a book of great depth, texture, and length, coming in at 781 pages, not counting afterwords and notes. This work should fare well in many award competitions.

Structurally, *The Prize* reads like the effort of a historian. Although the author is best known as an

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**The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power. Daniel Yergin. Simon & Schuster, \$27.50.*

energy analyst who makes his living selling reports to corporate clients through a consultancy called Cambridge Energy Research Associates, Yergin also has an academic background as a lecturer at Harvard. He first came to the public eye during the gas crisis years as coauthor of *Energy Future*, a compendium of gloomy projections that has not weathered well; but then practically everybody was snookered by the seventies conventional wisdom that we would soon freeze in the dark. Today, the output of Cambridge Associates deals mainly with routine matters like oil price and shipment trends, the old \$64,000 question of whether oil is running out no longer engaging much interest.

Oil über alles

As a work of history, *The Prize* is extraordinary and highly admirable. Like most histories, it contains a great deal of material rewritten from volumes appearing before, but Yergin adds fresh details obtained through original research in several archives around the world. He covers the origin of the oil economy and its growth in the Western, Arabian, and Indonesian worlds in rewarding depth.

But *The Prize* exhibits three failings, all pardonable given its many virtues. First, the great tale of oil is told largely through the eyes of the princes, sheiks, prime ministers, Rockefellers, and generals who wrestled over it at the highest tiers. We rarely hear what oil meant to people: what working at the early fields and refineries was like, what crewing a tanker or doing chemistry at an old Esso refinery was like, what effect this dark commodity and the political struggles regarding its control had on those below the elite level. Focusing on the prince is a common fault of historical accounts, partly because there are more primary source documents concerning the actions and thoughts of the upper classes. But by around page 500, the reconstructed conversations among Great-Men-Astride-the-Landscape-of-Lesser-Mortals began to grow wearisome. I found myself longing for the concerns of real human beings at the level where most of us live.

Second, *The Prize* suffers from the traditional author's insistence on inflating the significance of the subject matter at hand—a disappointing and unnecessary exercise here, since Yergin's subject needs no introduction.

To Yergin, practically all major political events of the 20th century can be interpreted as a struggle to secure supplies of fossil fuel. Tell that to the Vietcong, the African National Congress, Theodore Herzl, Mahatma Gandhi, the mujahedin, or the Sandanistas, to name a few. Yergin is correct to document how oil

shortages handicapped both the German and Japanese militaries in World War II, rendering victory more accessible to the allies than it might otherwise have been. But it seems well off the mark to portray Hitler's war planning as motivated primarily by anxiety about oil. Didn't hatred of Bolsheviks, Poles, and Jews, revenge for the Versailles Treaty, desire for an empire, and madness have something to do with it? And though the pre-Pearl Harbor Western embargo rendered imperial Japan insecure about its oil supplies, the fanatical militarism rising in that country probably would have manifested itself as war even if Tokyo had been sitting on a bigger field than Spindletop.

In a typical example of overselling, Yergin mentions the famous moment during MacArthur's landing at the Philippines when the main U.S. fleet was drawn off by a feint, and ships under Admiral Takeo Kurita found themselves in position to make quick work of the lightly protected troops going ashore at Leyte Gulf. "But just 40 miles away from the invasion beach," Yergin writes, "Kurita abruptly pulled off and sailed away. After the war, one of the Japanese admirals was asked why. 'Because,' he replied, 'of shortage of fuel.'" That may well have been the excuse fallen back on after the fact. Most historians have attributed Kurita's retreat to a heroic counterthrust by a small contingent of U.S. destroyers in the gulf, which charged the oncoming attackers with such total disregard for danger that the Japanese commander assumed they must have been the spearhead of a much larger force that had set a trap for him.

Finally, after asking us to bear with him for 800 pages, Yergin exits stage right from *The Prize* without suggesting anything about the future of oil or what energy policy ought to be. The book ends with a tacked-on chapter about Kuwait that's already stale, then some very general ruminating regarding the *Exxon Valdez* and oil mergers.

Yergin has been criticized for sidestepping issues like energy taxes that might upset his consultancy's corporate clients. The criticism is deserved. Putting Yergin on TV as an energy analyst now is a little like rolling out Henry Kissinger for commentary on business opportunities in China, if you'll pardon an analogy between a very congenial and well-liked man and a has-been egomaniac.

Having clients to please clouds judgment. I doubt Yergin altered any of his historical analysis with the corporate subscriber list in mind, because most of his clients will read only the articles about *The Prize*, not the text itself. But when the time came to assess what all the historical analysis leads up to and provide some conclusions, Yergin took the easy way out.

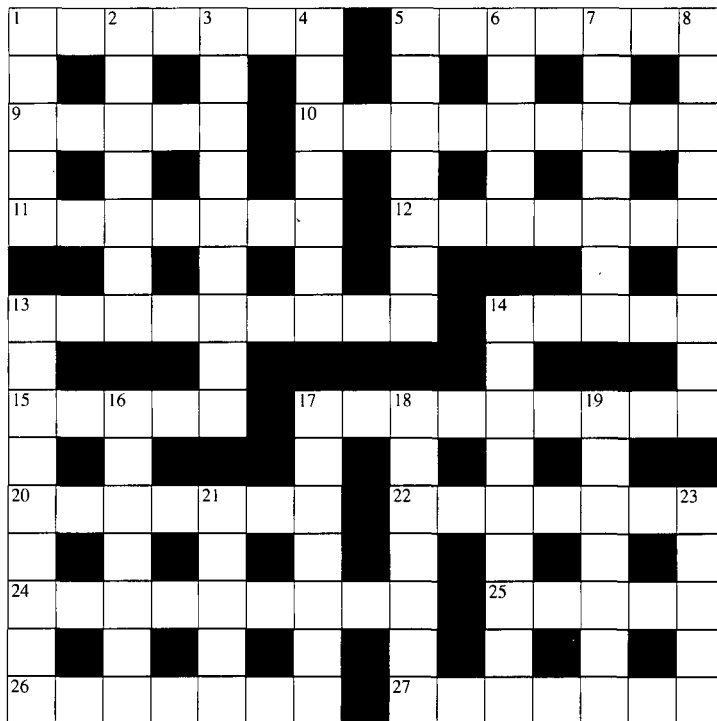
POLITICAL PUZZLE

by John Barclay

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.

ACROSS

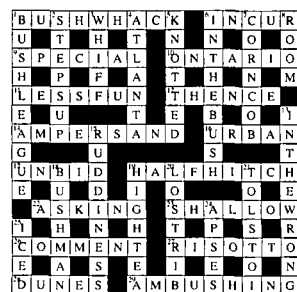
1. New England athlete specializing in defense? (7)
5. Sloppy slime is effective weapon. (7)
9. Looked for secrets in steno's education. (5)
10. Ritual destruction of ermine with TNT. (9)
11. Hint: CIA upset about import from Italy. (7)
12. Trooped in formation to stop project. (7)
13. Art schism developed from religious holiday. (9)
14. Dispute about university changing gear. (5)
15. Macho selection for flavor. (5)
17. Make unit start attack on business. (9)
20. Poe's pun misstated gets business going. (5,2)
22. Finished finally with links area. (7)
24. Mediterranean vessel disturbed even Latin. (9)
25. Austin school lad becoming mature. (5)
26. Business end of 5 Across around center of the cluttered drawer. (7)
27. Assembled the last expensive airplane. (7)



DOWN

1. Button up in and around cap. (5)
2. More irritable about half of fly coming back in row. (7)
3. Country depending on one's being absorbed by another country. (9)
4. Neat taking in returned suit, topless, for isotope. (7)
5. Adapts and must eat stew. (7)
6. Set up ruse before start of race to be more confident. (5)
7. Bird climbing to middle of sticks is ocean threat. (7)
8. Sociable type makes voter exert without effort. (9)
13. Type of wife who makes mom a clown. (6,3)
14. Deputy becomes neat later. (9)
16. Smart around a tool. (7)
17. Used softly in ideal form. (7)
18. Remnants of tart set around. (7)
19. Strange luaus cooked before international organization. (7)
21. Meaning serfs returning. (5)
23. After end of long march, urge for military service. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:



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