

The Americanization of the Persian Gulf

Mr. Shirley Temple, a certain Charles Black, has been engaged by the U. S. Government to carry out fishing expeditions in the Persian Gulf. His fishing company, Mardello, is in fact an undercover spy operation.

IN THE LAST TWELVE months the U.S. has replaced Britain as master of the oil-rich Persian Gulf, the richest site of imperialist plunder in the third world. For 150 years, from its war against Napoleon to its imperialist twilight in the late 1960s, Britain dominated the Gulf, and ensured the flow of oil and profits to the West. But at the end of 1917, Britain finally withdrew her colonial tutelage, leaving

a set of shaky neo-colonial states to continue the protection of Western interests. In a pattern set ever since 1947, when the U.S. took over the British role in Greece under the Truman Doctrine, Britain's pullout has been followed by a stepped-up U.S. involvement. Nixon's trip to Iran after his Moscow visit highlighted this change.

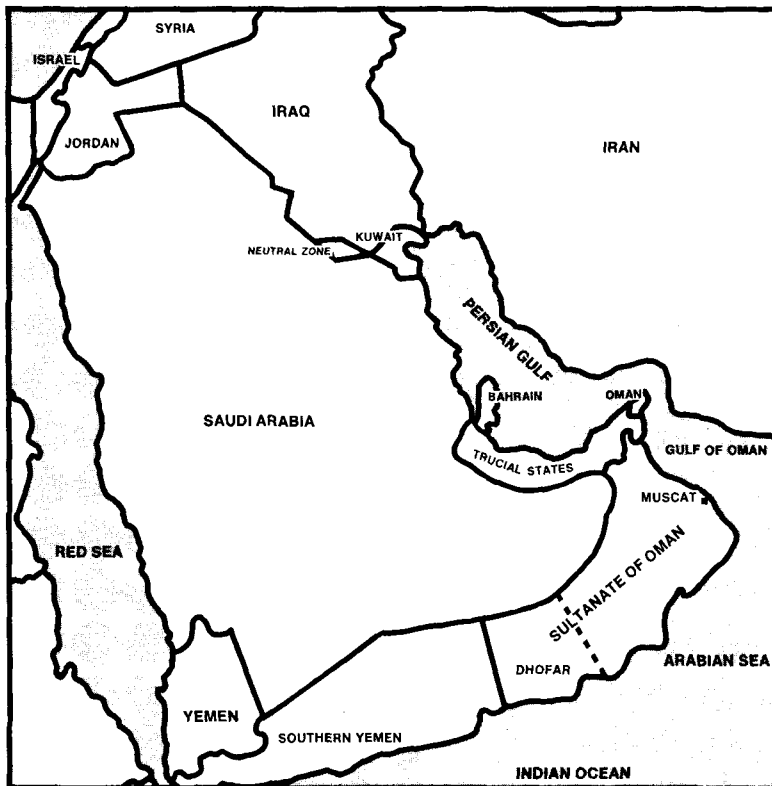
There are three reasons for this U.S. move. First, the Gulf is a zone of U.S.-

Soviet rivalry. Soviet economic and military power in Iraq, at the head of the Gulf, has led that country to boot out the Western oil monopoly that has long dominated its economy. Soviet naval activities in the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea trouble Pentagon strategists. The U.S. has already announced that once they are no longer needed in Indochina, ships of the Seventh Fleet will be redeployed in the Indian Ocean and Mideast zones.

A second reason for U.S. concern is that the regimes in Iran and in the Arab states along the Gulf coast are thought to be unstable from the West's point of view. Both inter-state disputes and clashes between the regimes and the popular opposition movements are likely in the near future. In the Sultanate of Oman, Marxist-Leninist guerrillas have liberated most of the province of Dhofar and have tied down the Sultan's army. The U.S. reckons that its presence in the Gulf will counter these destabilizing forces.

The third and most important reason is that the Gulf is the richest source of oil in the world. In the spring of 1972, the Nixon Administration began to issue alarmist statements about the future U.S. dependence on Gulf oil and the political weaknesses this could lead to. While the British were there, they controlled the zone *politically*—but the U.S. has the greatest *economic power*, with ownership of two-thirds of the oil and a \$5 billion investment. With 70 percent of the capitalist world's known reserves the Gulf is the key to U.S.

(Continued on page 20)



MAP BY JOHN WILLIAMS

by Fred Halliday



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(From page 18)

economic plunder of the Third World. Gulf oil is 30 times cheaper to produce than Texan or Alaskan oil, and this wealth of oil makes the area prone to careful Pentagon attention. With depletion in the U.S. and delays on the Alaska pipeline, the United States may have to import more than the mere 10 percent it does at the moment, and the big source for these imports will be the Gulf.

First public sign of the U.S. build-up in the Gulf came in January with the revelation that the U.S. had reached a secret deal on naval facilities in the Gulf state of Bahrain. The base there was built by the British, and the U.S. had used part of it since 1947. Last year, as the British began to leave, the U.S. moved in.

According to the State Department, the U.S. activity in the Gulf is only "a flag-showing operation to manifest U.S. interest in the area." But this is a lie. Although the U.S. presence is small (260 men permanently on shore, a flagship, two destroyers), it provides a foothold for future deployments, and for a permanent watch on all Soviet actions in the Gulf and Red Sea. It is also clearly a basis for U.S. intervention in Bahrain if the ruling pro-imperialist al-Khalifa family runs into trouble.

In 1956 and in 1965, British-officered troops crushed popular uprisings. Strikes began again in 1970, and a third big upsurge came this March, when a strike at the airport spread to town, and all shops, factories and schools came out on strike. After four days of battles in the streets, when the government used armored cars and reportedly brought in Bedouin tribesmen from Saudi Arabia, the workers were forced to return to work. Their leaders were thrown into prison. The U.S. is unlikely to have a quiet time in Bahrain with allies like the ruling al-Khalifa family. Since the first uprising of 1956, the al-Khalifa have lived outside the capital in a special fortified village, guarded by armed Bedouin. They doubtless find the U.S. naval presence reassuring.

More important than the Bahrain deal is the recent U.S. move into the Sultanate of Oman. Last October, Omani

Sultan Qabus entertained a party of U.S. visitors aboard his yacht. Head of the mission was Robert Anderson, Texas oilman and Secretary of the Treasury under Eisenhower—in this instance a front man for an elaborate move by the U.S. to move into the oil-rich Sultanate.

The most important publicized deal fixed up by Anderson was between the Sultan and a U.S. firm with fishing interests, Mardello, of which Charles Black, husband of Shirley Temple, is the head. Ostensibly, Mardello plans to run a joint U.S.-Omani fishing company off the Omani coast, i.e., in the northwest Indian Ocean. But officials in Washington, London and Muscat (Oman's capital) have let it be known that Mardello will also carry out intelligence surveillance for the U.S. government, spying on Russian naval activity in the Indian Ocean and on smaller ships that may be engaged in arms smuggling in the zone.

* * *

THE SULTANATE IS THE site of a fierce guerrilla war located in the southern province of Dhofar. Marxist-Leninist guerrillas in a People's Liberation Army have for eight years been fighting a people's war there against the British and their local mercenary army. They have captured most of the province and pose a direct political threat to the rest of the Gulf. Up to now the British-run Omani army has done without U.S. aid, but the new Mardello deal has changed this. According to the London *Evening Standard's* correspondent: "Washington observers now believe that President Nixon has decided to help protect the 1000-mile coastline of Oman."

In addition to this naval deal, Anderson has done well out of his Omani venture. He now has a contract to set up a diplomatic service for the Sultan, who has no ambassadors abroad at all. He has won oil exploration rights for part of the Sultanate, and for a large section of the offshore area. In addition he has acquired mineral rights for the whole of the country. No details of what might be there have been given, but the Egyptian press reported in January that large deposits of uranium

had been found in the Omani interior. This possibility, plus the fact that Omani oil is sulphur-free, make the country a rich prize.

The U.S. entry into Oman has only come after long negotiation. The Sultan used to be out of touch with the U.S. because he had a territorial dispute with the U.S.-backed Saudi Arabian government. But in June 1971, while the Sultan was in London on a private visit, he met representatives of the CIA. They proposed that the U.S. should give the Sultan financial aid to help him develop the country and step up his campaign in Dhofar. In December, the long-standing Saudi-Omani dispute was patched up; Omani Sultan Qabus visited Saudi Arabia and the deal was sealed. Since then Saudi and Omani forces have worked together. In particular, they have coordinated attacks on the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a revolutionary state that borders Oman and has given continued support to the guerrillas in Dhofar. Documents and arms captured from the attackers prove that the U.S. is helping these moves. Prisoners taken in the fighting have also reported receiving training from U.S. instructors in camps inside Saudi Arabia.

Although the zone is economically far more vital to the U.S. than Indochina, there is no likelihood in the immediate future of any comparable military interventions by the U.S. Rather than hold the people down itself, the U.S. wants the growing military powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran to do the job for it. Both countries have received massive military aid in the past twenty years. But the nature of U.S. commitment is such that, over the long run, it could easily find itself involved in a very messy situation. It stands behind the local rulers and is prepared to step up its intervention if its strategic and economic interests are threatened.

"Flag-showing" could then give way to "flag-waving." Places like Oman, Bahrain, Dhofar, and Yemen could then take on the importance that Laos, Quang Tri, and the Parrot's Beak have today.

Fred Halliday is an editor of New Left Review in London.

THE DIPLOMACY OF TERROR:



BEHIND THE DECISION TO BOMB THE DIKES

"A series of secret diplomatic messages, recently made known to Ramparts, tends to bear out Hanoi's charge that the Nixon Administration is systematically destroying North Vietnam's dike system. As Washington is well aware, the destruction of the dikes would cause the devastation of the North Vietnamese heartland and the slaughter of millions throughout the country. . . ."

by David Landau