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BRITISH VULNERABILITY AND THE CONQUEST OF MESOPOTAMIA

Until 1917, the threat of oil coercion was poorly understood. Mechanized warfare was new, and resultantly, petroleum had not been targeted in previous conflicts. That year, however, Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare destroyed large numbers of oil tankers destined for Britain, demonstrating that the evolution from coal-based fleets to ships running on petroleum—which Britain lacked—made the country exceedingly vulnerable to coercion in future wars. Behind this vulnerability lay two factors: Great Britain's large petroleum deficit, and the susceptibility of its oil imports to naval blockade. As my theory predicts, Britain took a direct control approach by annexing Mesopotamian oil resources and establishing a regional mandate after the war. Mesopotamia produced no oil at the time and could not affect the outcome of World War I, but it was believed to possess massive resources that could determine the winner of future wars.[1] Direct control was costly and risky to the British; the invasion risked fracturing the Western alliance and provoking conflict with the United States over the division of Ottoman spoils.[2]

This chapter presents the British case in the years before, during, and after World War I—the turning point for oil-fueled warfare, marking the onset of coercive vulnerability logic. In the first period, before 1917, there was some concern in the Admiralty that the ongoing switch to oil-burning propulsion could be strategically problematic; but policymakers as yet did not understand the coercive potential of the "oil weapon," and they did little to protect access.

The second period of study considers Germany's attempt in 1917 to coerce Britain into surrendering by attacking its imports of American petroleum with

unrestricted submarine warfare. This inaugural use of the oil weapon was a near miss: it failed to force British capitulation, but just barely. German U-boats successfully destroyed large amounts of petroleum destined for Britain, causing severe oil shortages that nearly immobilized the Royal Navy. Only at the eleventh hour was Britain saved by emergency petroleum shipments provided by the United States. The British feared what would happen if the Americans did not bail them out should they be faced with the oil weapon again in the future. This leads to the third era, strategic anticipation, when the logic of coercive vulnerability theory sets in. This shift set British policy on a course it would follow until the start of World War II.

Evolving Views on Oil's Importance before World War I

In the decade before World War I, the British government was becoming increasingly aware of the importance of oil for military power. But few officials anticipated that oil would become so indispensable to war that a country would be unable to prevail in a conflict without it. Nor did British policymakers seem to grasp that oil's unique military value meant that supply cutoffs could potentially be used for political coercion. Calculations involving oil were not yet driving British grand strategy. "It cannot be argued," according to Marian Jack, "that oil was recognized by the British government before the war as a peculiarly vital commodity over which it should have general control."[3]

Only a small number of individuals in the Admiralty had sensed oil's new importance for warfare. Admiral John Fisher was perhaps the most influential among them. During Fisher's tenure as First Sea Lord from 1904 to 1910, the Royal Navy embarked on a massive transition from coal-fueled ships to oil-burning vessels. The many performance advantages petroleum fuel had to offer, such as higher top speeds, faster acceleration, and increased range, had convinced Fisher that conversion was crucial for maintaining British naval superiority in the face of German competition. Winston Churchill, a disciple of Fisher's who was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911, expanded the program, and by 1912 all destroyers, cruisers, and battleships ran on oil.[4]

The problem associated with conversion, of course, was that it required Britain to switch from a fuel found in abundance domestically (coal) to one that it did not possess (oil). Nineteenth-century British naval power owed a lot to the country's massive coal resources, which were "far superior to those of any other nation," and which included large amounts of premium Welsh steam coal for high-speed propulsion. In fact, British soil was so rich in coal that the country

became one of the world's premier coal exporters, with coal accounting for 85 percent of the country's total export tonnage in 1913.[5]

Early Efforts to Secure Fuel for the Royal Navy

The absence of domestic petroleum reserves raised concerns in the Admiralty as well as in Parliament about ensuring a steady supply for the Royal Navy, particularly given the expected twenty-year life span of the newly built oil-burning vessels. Urged on by the Admiralty, the British government took modest steps toward this goal as opportunities presented themselves. However, these efforts were ad hoc—not a comprehensive plan for safeguarding oil access.

The most important step taken was the government's involvement in creating and maintaining an exclusively British oil concession in Persia. Under his own gumption, William Knox D'Arcy, an Australian with financial backing from British banks, had negotiated an exclusive deal with the shah of Iran in 1901 for a sixty-year unlimited petroleum concession. The investment quickly bore fruit with the speedy discovery and exploitation of Persian crude. In 1905, D'Arcy decided to bring in more capital by partnering with the French Rothschilds to develop the concession further—that is, until the British government dispatched its spymaster Sidney Reilly to break up the deal. In a stunt reminiscent of a 1980s Eddie Murphy movie, Reilly disguised himself as a priest and persuaded D'Arcy, a religious man, to instead sell his rights to a good "Christian" firm—the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC).[6] The concession thus passed into the hands of a company entirely controlled by British nationals. Over the next several years, the British government extended diplomatic support to APOC in its efforts to obtain a concession in Ottoman Mesopotamia, while the Admiralty pressured APOC to retain strictly British ownership over Persian oil.[7]

Matters were more complicated in 1912 when APOC asked the British government for financial assistance in light of tough competition from Royal Dutch-Shell—a company Anglo-Persian successfully painted as "foreign" despite its 40 percent British ownership.[8] The Admiralty rejected the plan for funding Anglo-Persian at first. Churchill and his officers thought it unwise for the government to assume the financial risks associated with the business of oil exploration. Moreover, the Admiralty wanted to maintain its freedom to purchase oil from diverse sources, particularly if those sources could offer it more cheaply. For its part, Anglo-Persian made the strategic argument to the country's political leaders, contending that national security would be better served by the preservation of an all-British petroleum conglomerate. But this was not enough to sway the Admiralty. Only when it became clear that Anglo-Persian was willing to offer very favorable long-term contracts to the Royal Navy did Churchill come around. "The

argument that really caused the Admiralty to change its mind," as Marian Jack tells it, "was the chance of a good bargain." As a result, the British government bought a 51 percent controlling share in Anglo-Persian in May 1914. It was an unprecedented move; never before had such an arrangement been negotiated with any major company.[9] But the impetus behind it was more a matter of cost cutting than one of national security. The British did not yet appreciate the danger posed by petroleum cutoff, nor did they understand the extent to which the country's lack of oil made it vulnerable.

Strategic Priorities in the Middle East: India Overshadows Oil

Of course, the growth of German political and economic influence in the Ottoman Empire that was occurring at the time alarmed the British. The possibility that German firms could beat British interests in obtaining Ottoman oil concessions prompted serious economic and strategic concerns. But oil was just one aspect of the Anglo-German rivalry in the Middle East—and not necessarily the most important one. Above all else, the British wanted to preserve their supremacy in the Persian Gulf for the inevitable day when the Ottoman Empire, the "sick man of Europe," would finally collapse. The British position in the region mattered chiefly because of its implications for the defense of the empire's "Jewel in the Crown": colonial India. If Germany succeeded in obtaining a political toehold in Ottoman Turkey, it could seriously compromise Indian security. The primary maritime and overland routes to India ran smack through the Middle East. German penetration in the region, therefore, threatened to cut the empire in half in the event of a European war.

These priorities are reflected in the actions taken by the British in the first few years of the war, before the vital strategic nature of oil was illuminated. Although the British could not ignore the Middle East given its instrumental value in protecting India, Europe remained the clear priority. Thwarting German expansion on the continent was vital to the security of the British Isles, and preserving the sovereignty of the home islands naturally trumped threats to the empire. This compelled the British to concentrate the great majority of their resources along the western front. Moreover, to sustain strong alliances with France and Russia, which were necessary for Britain to have any hope of defeating Germany, the British had vowed to refrain from annexing any Ottoman territory until the war's conclusion.[10] The promise was in keeping with Britain's historical policy of preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire for as long as possible, out of the belief that a Turkish collapse would set off a dangerous scramble for territory among the major powers. Such a scramble pitting the Entente powers against each

other could undermine the primary war aim: vanquishing Germany. Finally, the Middle East was not yet producing oil on a large scale. The only productive area in the region was the Persian concession, which contributed a mere 1 percent of global oil output in 1914.[11] During the war itself, Persia provided just 15 percent of the Royal Navy's fuel requirements; the rest of Britain's oil came from the Western Hemisphere—predominantly from the United States.[12]

In summary, the actions Britain took in the Middle East from 1914 to 1917 were commensurate with the primary British objective in the region—the protection of communications with India—and revealed only modest concern over oil. Shortly after declaring war on Turkey in November 1914, the British sent a small contingent of troops to guard the Abadan naval fuel refinery in Persia and dispatched a modest Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force to defend the port city of Basra on the Persian Gulf. Both moves served to shore up Indian security; the two contingents were composed of Indian troops and fell under the command of Lord Hardinge, the viceroy of India. The administration of the occupied areas fell under the preserve of the Foreign Office, not the cabinet.[13] Once deployed, these troops largely remained in a holding pattern, deterring attacks against communications with India until early 1917. There was no significant attempt to overrun Ottoman territory or take control of promising petroleum areas. Britain lacked the resources to penetrate far into Mesopotamia given the action on the western front and could not do so in any case without risking its European alliances. The other main military operation undertaken by the British against the Turks was the ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign of 1915, which had nothing to do with petroleum. Rather, British and French forces opened a new front against Turkey in the Dardanelles at the request of Russia, which was facing severe pressure from Ottoman forces in the Caucasus.[14] Only the seizure of Abadan could reasonably be described as defending an oil interest.

Prelude to a Shift in British Foreign Oil Policy

Behind the scenes, however, circumstances were aligning to set the stage for a shift in British objectives in the Middle East. Two factors held particular importance. First, in the context of the Gallipoli Campaign, Czar Nicholas II made clear his expectation that control of Constantinople would pass to Russia upon conclusion of the war—a concession to which the British and French reluctantly agreed. This prompted the British to consider, in turn, what they should demand by way of Ottoman territories after hostilities ceased. To that end, Herbert Henry Asquith's government formed a committee under the leadership of Sir Maurice De Bunsen of the Foreign Office to determine Britain's strategic interests in the Middle East and make recommendations as to British war aims in the region.

In its report of June 1915, the De Bunsen Committee reaffirmed the importance of maintaining the Persian Gulf as a British sphere of influence for the land defense of India and called for the annexation of Basra. But the committee also recommended an additional objective: control of Mesopotamia all the way north through Baghdad to Mosul. By 1915 it was widely suspected that these lands held massive petroleum reserves,[15] which the committee, in conjunction with the Admiralty, argued would prove vital to British naval power in the future. Given the Royal Navy's unexpected and skyrocketing demand for petroleum as the war waged on, "the hypothetical oil of Iraq was rapidly becoming an asset that none of the British officials concerned could ignore." Although no immediate action was taken to occupy these regions, the De Bunsen recommendations did factor into the secret Sykes-Picot negotiations with France that began in December 1915 and resulted in an agreement on the partition of the Ottoman Empire in May 1916. Concurrently, a group of geologists from APOC prospecting in southern Iraq confirmed that sizable petroleum deposits existed in the area.[16] In the final draft of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Britain ultimately laid claim to Mesopotamia up through Baghdad; Mosul, however, was ceded to France. This oversight would come back to haunt the British in postwar negotiations.

The second factor that laid the foundation for a change in Britain's Middle East war aims was the fall of Asquith's government in December 1916, and the rise of a coalition government under David Lloyd George. The new prime minister was much more hawkish than his predecessor and escalated the war by ordering a new offensive against the Ottomans in early 1917. He also brought in advisers sympathetic to the Admiralty's evolving views on the significance of oil to naval power. The most important was Maurice Hankey, whom Lloyd George appointed as secretary of the newly formed War Cabinet. A former captain in the Royal Fleet, Hankey had served on the De Bunsen Committee and strongly favored expansion into oil-rich Ottoman territories.[17] Arthur Balfour, Lloyd George's choice for the position of secretary of state for foreign affairs, also had navy ties, having served as first lord of the Admiralty under Asquith's government from May 1915 to December 1916. Yet another strong advocate of conquering Mesopotamia, Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, was appointed chairman of the Middle East Committee and thus given authority over all matters within the region. Therefore, by the start of 1917, the highest levels of the British government were stacked with men predisposed toward making control of oil a major war aim.

In sum, while oil was viewed as important by the British government during this period, it represented one of many competing considerations associated with Middle East policy. It did not trump other concerns, nor does it appear that the British government understood oil to be unique among raw materials useful for war. Although certain members of the Admiralty foresaw that a lack of petroleum

could pose difficulty for the Royal Navy, especially if supply at a reasonable cost could not be guaranteed over the life span of newly built vessels, even they failed to fully appreciate the political vulnerability Britain faced.

The Blockade

Everything changed in February 1917, when Germany strengthened its blockade of Great Britain by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant shipping in the North Atlantic. The Germans had tried this tactic on a much smaller scale in 1915, but the backlash it provoked from the United States and other neutral countries forced them to abandon the campaign. By the start of 1917, however, Germany was so desperate to end the war that its leaders were willing to run grave risks. Targeting raw material shipments crucial to Britain's war effort, they believed, offered Germany the best chance of forcing Great Britain to the negotiating table. The Germans fully recognized that the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare would bring the United States into the war against Germany, but they gambled that if they could interdict enough tonnage, they could knock Britain out of the war before the Americans could mobilize. The bet almost paid off.

Fuel Shortages Cripple the Fleet

The tightened blockade threw the British armed forces into a crisis almost immediately. Of all the materials Great Britain lost to U-boat torpedoes, petroleum did the greatest damage to its war machine, and the Germans soon went out of their way to target fuel tankers and oilers. By 1917, Britain was relying on the United States for nearly 90 percent of its total petroleum needs.[18] American oil, of course, had no other way to reach Britain than by sea, and therefore it was entirely vulnerable to German submarine attacks.

Petroleum shortages emerged in early spring and grew increasingly severe each month. Civilian rationing was imposed; yet the real danger the blockade posed was to Britain's military power. Nearly all of the oil imported by Great Britain went directly to the armed forces. As J. C. Clarke, an Admiralty official, reported to the War Cabinet at the height of the crisis in July 1917, the Royal Navy "was practically the sole user of oil fuel in this country."[19] Tanker losses caused stockpiles of fuel oil to plummet from five months' consumption in February to two months' in May.[20] By summer, the situation was precarious. Admiralty reports described Britain's position as "very grave" and recommended "strictly limiting the speed of all oil-burning vessels of the Fleet, except in the gravest emergency," as well as the "limitation of Fleet movements to the utmost possible extent."[21] The

Admiralty similarly told British officials in Washington, "The Navy Fuel situation is giving us the greatest anxiety and we are within measurable distance of seeing the Fleet immobilized."[22]

Uncomfortable Dependence on the "Goodwill of the USA"

The British had little choice but to make desperate entreaties to the United States for emergency shipments of petroleum. Fuel shortages were so acute that British and French leaders warned that they might be forced to negotiate an end to the war with Germany if something was not done immediately to ensure the delivery of American oil. "The Germans are succeeding," reported the U.S. ambassador in London in July. "They have lately sunk so many fuel oil ships, that this country may very soon be in a perilous condition—even the Grand Fleet may not have enough fuel. . . . It is a very grave danger."[23] That same month, Arthur Balfour, the foreign secretary, sent a cable to Alfred Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe, the British commissioner in the United States, informing him that the British fleet would be immobilized by September unless three hundred thousand additional tons of oil could be obtained from the United States. Balfour cited two reasons for the crisis: the Royal Navy's soaring demand for petroleum combined with the loss of oil tankers to German U-boats.[24]

Although Britain's coercive vulnerability was severe, pursuing a direct control strategy to remedy the situation was impossible at the height of the crisis for three main reasons. First, British forces could barely keep the Germans at bay on the western front, precluding any realistic chance of opening a new campaign to capture oil resources. Second, there was no readily attainable oil to be found. Global production was already dominated by distant great powers—namely, the United States and Russia—or countries within their spheres of influence.[25] Third, and most important, the mistake had already been made. Britain's weakness at the time reflected a failure to anticipate before the war just how quickly oil would supplant coal during the course of the conflict. Had Britain acted more strenuously to secure supplies before the war, perhaps it could have avoided such a situation through anticipatory measures; but by the summer of 1917 that opportunity had passed. In fairness to the British, anticipating the threat was probably impossible. No one foresaw just how much oil would be needed to fight, both because World War I was the first major mechanized conflict and because its conduct turned out to be unprecedented in scale. Perhaps more to the point, oil coercion had never been attempted before, and therefore states had not fully grasped the consequences. The British experience let the proverbial cat out of the bag, revealing to all the great powers the significance of the new threat.

Ultimately, Britain squeaked through the crisis thanks to three factors. The most important was the emergency delivery of additional oil from the United States, which more than doubled oil exports to the United Kingdom from 1.33 million tons in 1916 to 2.75 million tons in 1917. Harsh conservation measures adopted by the Royal Navy, including speed restrictions and a virtual grounding of the fleet, also played a role. Finally, the development of the convoy system curtailed losses to German submarines.[26] By early 1918, the worst had passed.

Britain narrowly escaped coming to terms with Imperial Germany, but the near miss shook up those in the highest echelons of government and convinced leaders that Britain could not be caught unprepared again. It was not lost on officials that the primary reason Britain survived the U-boat campaign was "the goodwill of the USA" in providing emergency oil supplies.[27] This near-total dependence on the United States raised alarming questions. What if in the next war the Americans did not rush to the rescue? After all, the country had deep isolationist tendencies. Could Britain really count on another nation, even an ally, to come through in a crisis? The British now understood that petroleum was too vital a resource to depend on others for access. The growing voices in the Admiralty finally had an opportunity for advocating strong anticipatory policies to prevent Britain from falling victim to oil coercion in the future. They were pushing on an open door.

The Slade Memo: A New Course for British Grand Strategy

In the months following the petroleum crisis, the Admiralty went to work determining what steps needed to be taken to reduce the country's vulnerability. In July 1918, they released a lengthy memorandum explaining the threat of oil coercion and sketching the foundation of a grand strategic plan for protecting Great Britain from it. This memo, written by Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, would guide decades of British strategy.

Slade's memo demonstrated a clear understanding of Britain's high vulnerability, which would worsen in future wars, and explained the need for strategic anticipation. British naval security, Slade argued, relied on the control of oil. Because the superior performance of oil-burning vessels was quickly rendering coal obsolete, Britain had no choice but to fuel its navy with petroleum—despite lacking domestic oil resources. "The gradual substitution of Oil for Coal will in the future," Slade warned, "wrest from our grasp one of the principal factors on which the maintenance of our Naval position depends. . . . It is no exaggeration to say that our life as an Empire is largely dependent upon our ability to maintain the control of bunker fuel." As a result, Slade argued, "it is consequently of

paramount importance to us to obtain the undisputed control of the greatest amount of Petroleum that we can. This control must be absolute and there must be no foreign interests involved."[28]

Heightening the urgency, Slade noted that Britain's traditional sources of supply were facing steep decline. Before World War I, Britain received 62 percent of its petroleum from the United States, 12 percent from Romania, 8 percent from Russia, 8 percent from the Dutch colonies, and 4 percent from Mexico. Yet for a variety of reasons, Britain would not be able to count on these sources in the future. Slade cited official reports from the U.S. Department of the Interior indicating that American oil fields were in serious decline, with perhaps as little as twenty years of U.S. domestic consumption remaining. According to Slade, the situation was creating "a great deal of anxiety in the States." He predicted that within the next decade, "the amount of Petroleum that we shall be able to draw from the United States will be greatly diminished if not entirely stopped," not least because American officials would attempt to conserve oil resources for as long as possible and earmark them for domestic consumption. In Russia, political turmoil made it very unlikely that Russian oil fields would produce enough oil for an exportable surplus. Romania, having surrendered to the Central Powers in May 1918, had effectively fallen under enemy control. Even if it regained its commercial independence after the war, British experts believed that the Romanian oil industry would soon decline, leaving little to no surplus for export. Mexican oil would likely be consumed by the United States given its geographical proximity and the deep American involvement in Mexico's petroleum industry. Finally, total production in the Dutch East Indies would be far too small to supply British needs.[29]

To make matters worse, Slade contended, the tight supply situation likely to emerge in the future would prompt aggression from Britain's oil-importing rivals, which would similarly struggle to maintain access. "It is therefore clear that competition will be most severe," especially from Germany, which "will hesitate at nothing that will prevent the control of liquid fuel from passing into our hands and will endeavor by every means in her power to secure it for herself. . . . Germany recognizes the great strategic importance of securing a dominating position in the control of oil supplies. . . . We must take prompt action if our oil position is to be safeguarded."[30]

Only the Middle East, believed to hold vast petroleum resources, could provide enough oil for future British needs in an age of oil-powered navies. "It is evident that the Power that controls the oil lands of Persia and Mesopotamia," Slade argued, "will control the source of supply of the majority of the liquid fuel of the future . . . and will be in a position to dictate its own terms to all shipping in case of war." Strengthening British naval power was the only solution for defeating

future blockade attempts and defending the far-flung empire. Although Middle East oil was far away and could reach the British Isles only by sea, direct control would boost the capabilities of the Royal Fleet, already the world's preponderant navy, to defend its supply lines from weaker foes such as Germany. Furthermore, Britain could use its exclusive control to ban sales of Mideast oil to rivals—extending its relative advantage even more. Therefore, Slade concluded that Britain must establish exclusive control over Middle East oil "at all costs" to secure its military position and "enjoy all the advantages that this will give us if we find ourselves forced into another war."[31]

Evidence suggests that Slade's memo had a direct impact on British policy. Maurice Hankey, the secretary of the War Cabinet who had sat on the De Bunsen Committee, found Slade's memo compelling and made certain it crossed the desks of the most powerful principals in Lloyd George's government. He personally forwarded the memo to Prime Minister Lloyd George; to Arthur Balfour, the secretary of state for foreign affairs; and to Eric Geddes, who was then serving as the first lord of the Admiralty.[32] Now that defeat of Germany appeared inevitable—the "black day of the German army" famously lamented by Erich Ludendorff had occurred on August 8—time was of the essence for Britain to make its move in the Middle East before the severe competition foreseen by Slade could come to pass.

On the eve of the pivotal Imperial War Cabinet meeting to revisit British war aims in the Middle East, Hankey lobbied hard in favor of conquering oil-rich Mesopotamian territory beyond the current British lines. Balfour was a critical target because he was slated to give a speech at the meeting. Hankey wrote to Balfour: "As I understand the matter, oil in the next war will occupy the place of coal in the present war. . . . The only big potential supply that we can get under British control is the Persian and Mesopotamian supply. The point where you come in is that the control over these oil supplies becomes a first-class British war aim. I write to urge that in your statement to the Imperial War Cabinet you should rub this in." Balfour scribbled "I entirely agree" on his copy of Hankey's cover letter.[33]

At the meeting, Balfour echoed Hankey's concerns and advocated for reopening the Mesopotamian campaign in order to seize petroleum resources. "I do not care under what system we keep the oil, whether it is by a perpetual lease or whatever it may be," Balfour argued, "but I am quite clear it is all-important for us that this oil should be available." This represented a major change in Balfour's thinking compared with the start of the war, when he believed annexing Mesopotamia would be a mistake. Lloyd George agreed with Balfour's new conclusions. Thus, the Imperial War Cabinet decided to occupy all oil-rich land in Mesopotamia before the war ended—with particular emphasis on capturing Mosul.[34] Because the Sykes-Picot agreement had shortsightedly ceded Mosul to France, it was imperative that Britain move quickly to create "facts on the ground" to gain

leverage in postwar negotiations over the city's final status. Thus began a race against time for British forces to advance as far up the Tigris as possible before peace could be concluded with Turkey. By the time an armistice was signed with the Ottomans on October 30, British forces were still several miles outside Mosul. Aware that time had run out, they nevertheless pushed on, capturing the city days after formal hostilities ceased.[35]

Britain's direct control strategy in the Middle East paid off handsomely. Once they officially won their claim to Mosul in exchange for ceding Syria to France at the 1920 San Remo conference, the British had acquired control over vast quantities of petroleum. That year, the oil fields of Mesopotamia were estimated to contain reserves equal to those the United States was estimated to possess—about nine billion barrels.[36] Before the war, only 5 percent of the world's oil production came from territories under British control. But as a direct result of the British Middle Eastern mandate, 50 percent of known global oil reserves were now controlled by British companies.[37] As will be discussed in chapter 6, Britain's new oil prominence provoked serious security concerns in the United States, setting off a major rivalry over petroleum concessions. Nevertheless, through conquest, the British dramatically improved their oil security situation.