The fractured globalization of the contemporary world presents corporate oil with a different challenge from the benign globalization once forecast – one that takes us into the sphere of international relations, diplomacy, and warfare. In this context the Roman Empire/Barbarian template appears more apposite and in tune with emerging-world geopolitics than that of any liberalizing, neutral, open market model.” – from Empires of Oil by Duncan Clarke

Barbarians at the Gates

Empires of Oil: Corporate Oil in Barbarian Worlds
Duncan Clarke
Profile Books
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“...the largely Left-leaning peak oil community. Clarke’s latest effort, Empires of Oil: Corporate Oil in Barbarian Worlds, will no doubt incense many of the same people who took issue with his earlier work. Basing his assertions broadly upon Gibbon’s The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and Machiavelli’s The Prince, Clarke casts the United States as a modern version of Rome, struggling against various barbarian hordes who battle to end the supremacy of the dominant empire of the day. However, while Rome’s position as antiquity’s sole superpower sprang from its superior military organization and social structure, the United States’ dominance is based on access to a large supply of affordable energy. Currently, the majority of that energy takes the form of oil.

Clarke’s contention certainly helps explain the parallel rise of American political and military power and the emergence of the American oil companies that came to dominate global oil production in the 20th century. The “empires of oil” that private companies like Chevron, Texaco, Exxon, and Mobil managed to assemble were an essential component of the larger American empire, and in many ways its corporate mirror. Clarke is careful never to overstate the relationship between Washington and corporate oil. While the corporate empires assembled by America’s

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supermajors remain an essential part of the energy supply that allows America to maintain its imperial status, the author points out that the United States government and American oil companies do not always share specific or short-term goals. Indeed, many of the major players in corporate oil are not even American companies. No discussion of corporate oil is complete without mentioning the likes of BP, Shell, Eni, and Total. However, when viewed through Clarke’s imperial rubric, corporate oil and Washington are in the similar position of having their dominance openly challenged. Rather than parrot the simplistic mantra about how politicos and big oil are in bed with each other, Clarke goes beyond to examine how “barbarians” are eroding both American imperial power and the oil empires built by corporate oil’s most storied companies. More importantly, Clarke’s imperial metaphor is designed to show that even the mightiest of empires is subject to inevitable decline and eventual fall. That rule applied to Rome, and certainly applies to Washington and to the empires of corporate oil.

Clarke uses the politically incorrect term “barbarian” to describe the many threats encountered by corporate oil in today’s globalizing world. However, the term is designed not to insult those elements that pose a danger to corporate oil’s hegemony, but to point out that there are many elements in the modern world that can ultimately be as damaging to corporate empires as Germanic tribes were to Rome. Indeed, Clarke’s “barbarians” range from national oil companies that compete directly with corporate oil for access to prime exploration acreage to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are quick to lay much of the planet’s environmental, economic, and social woes at the feet of big oil. In Clarke’s mind corporate oil has so many foes that he divides them into animate enemies like environmental activists or resource nationalists and inanimate enemies like social or economic conditions that create an environment hostile to corporate oil.

With a plethora of barbarians hoping to storm the gates of the various corporate oil empires, it is no surprise that, after stating corporate oil’s problems in terms influenced by Gibbon, Clarke states the solutions in terms influenced by Machiavelli. The author blasts oil companies for their “warm, fuzzy” approach to placating NGOs, claiming that caving in to pressure from activists to become more transparent, socially responsible, and environmentally friendly, will leave them at a comparative disadvantage when competing against national oil companies in emerging exploration zones like Africa.

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While Clarke will certainly draw the ire of the host of NGOs he slams throughout Empires of Oil, the book is not meant as a blunt condemnation of corporate oil’s opponents but is instead a more sophisticated criticism of corporate oil itself. “How long can it be before corporate oil raises its awareness of the many hostile forces arraigned against it and determines to learn more about them,” he writes. “Many companies still seem either unconcerned or myopic about the social world in which they operate.” At a time when barbarians are challenging the dominance of corporate oil on a number of fronts, many companies seem oblivious to the size of the challenge. Clarke claims that there will be no easy answers to the repeated challenges faced by corporate oil in the 21st century. However, if corporate oil empires wish to avoid the fate of ancient Rome, then they had better begin developing a Machiavellian level of guile. To do that, they will have to gain a better understanding of the world in which they now operate. To get that type of understanding a good first step would be to read Empires of Oil.  

Empires of Oil

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