



Conflict Over Natural Resources

By Jeff Spoden

People have always killed each other over resources. The twentieth century was no exception, as empires and nation-states battled for control of resources that have become increasingly scarce.

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Water. You turn on the faucet and it spills out. You flush the toilet and it quickly refills. You probably take it for granted. But have you ever considered that although the Earth is covered in water, only .03 percent is fit for drinking? That means 99.7 percent of the planet's water is unusable! Almost 1 billion people cannot access clean water. With a growing global population, it's a recipe for disaster. Could a water shortage cause a war? Many experts answer with a worried "Yes."



Humanitarian agency distributing water during a 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa. By Oxfam, Flickr, CC BY 2.0.

We are often taught that most wars have political causes. Countries are motivated by national pride or the desire to show power. But as the climate changes, it becomes more likely that future conflicts will be fought over clean water and other natural resources. That's not new. The major conflicts of the twentieth century were at least partly driven by access to natural resources. To glimpse the possible future, we might look into the past.

The big wars and colonialism

Conflict over resources played a part in the most destructive wars of the twentieth century. Many history books explain the causes of World War I (1914 to 1918) as the result of national and military rivalries. It was then triggered by the 1914 assassination of Austria's Archduke Ferdinand. But behind it all was the competition for African and Asian resources. European powers were carving up Africa. They also competed for colonies in Asia. They sought to feed their growing industries with materials from elsewhere. Colonies provided both the natural resources and cheap labor to get them. Britain and France built global empires in the nineteenth century. Germany was late to the game of colonial conquest. It wanted to "catch up" to its European economic rivals. This fierce competition was a main cause of World War I.

Like most sequels, World War II (1939 to 1945) was more of the same, but worse. Behind the global conflict were major economic factors. In Europe, Adolph Hitler wanted to rule Europe. One of his stated goals was to secure more territory for the German people. He also wanted to access the resources required to compete with economic giants like the United States. In Asia, Japan wanted its own empire. It expanded its military and invaded China. The

United States responded by stopping trade with Japan. The U.S. government blocked the sale of oil, rubber, iron, and other materials necessary for the expansion of Japan's industry and military.

Desperate for resources—particularly oil—Japanese military leaders invaded much of Southeast Asia. To secure new colonies, Japanese leaders concluded the U.S. Navy would have to be crippled. In December 1941, the Japanese navy attacked the American fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The United States immediately declared war on Japan. The Americans entered World War II.



Aftermath of a Japanese bombing attack on oil tanks at Dutch Harbor, Alaska, 1942. Public domain.

Decolonization—Messy breakups

After the two world wars, many colonized peoples rose up. They organized to free themselves from colonial control. But anti-colonial leaders knew their long-term success depended on controlling their nations' natural resources. In other words, the fights to overthrow colonial rule were also conflicts over natural resources. Here are two examples:

1. Egypt: In 1956, after Britain's withdrawal, Gamal Abdel-Nasser became president. He immediately seized control of the nation's resources. He redistributed land from wealthy landowners to farmers. He nationalized¹ the Suez Canal, the important waterway linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. Whoever controlled the canal also controlled oil shipments from the Middle East to Europe. Britain, France, and Israel invaded in response. However, their attempt to return control of the canal to the British failed.
2. French Indochina (Vietnam): Indochina was a French colony. It had provided rubber, tin, timber, tungsten, and bauxite² to the French Empire since the mid-nineteenth century. Ho Chi Minh became a popular nationalist leader in Vietnam. A communist, Ho led North Vietnamese forces against Japanese, French, and

¹ Tungsten is a valuable metal used in electric lights and other items that reach high temperatures, and bauxite is red clay that provides a metallic mineral used in a variety of industries.

² When a company or organization is nationalized, the government takes ownership of it.

American occupying armies from 1941 until his death in 1969. After decades of fighting, Vietnam became a unified and independent country in 1975.

3. Dutch East Indies (Indonesia): After World War II, national leaders in Indonesia declared independence from the Netherlands. The Dutch refused, wanting to maintain easy access to Indonesia's oil, timber, copper, coal, tin, and bauxite. The Indonesian leaders launched a guerrilla war. After four years of fighting, the Dutch were finally convinced to leave in 1949.



[Sukarno](#), the first president of Indonesia, proclaiming independence, 1945. Public domain.

Neocolonialism

Colonial empires started shrinking after 1945. However, the former colonial powers continued to dominate decolonized nations. Western capitalist nations gave up “official” control of their colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In these places, the economic systems created by colonialism remained in place. They made these new developing countries dependent on their former colonizers. Their economies actually now depended on Western corporations. These giant businesses bought national resources. They also employed local people at very low pay.

In many places, these corporations intervened in local politics. In many cases, they were backed by Western governments. Some scholars call this “neocolonialism.” The goals of neocolonialism are economic: access to natural resources and cheap labor. While these countries were breaking free from colonial rule, their economies were still very much dominated by the United States, Britain, and France.

Black gold

And what was the most important of these resources? Oil. Geologists determined that the Earth's largest supply of easily available oil was under the Middle East. The result has been constant struggles for access to this precious resource. In 1951, Mohammed Mosaddegh became Iran's prime minister. Two years later he nationalized the country's oilfields. They were seized from a British oil company. American and British intelligence agencies helped to overthrow Mosaddegh's government.



Few things can symbolize the prioritization of resources in political conflicts than this image of Iraqi oil fields burning in 1991. Saddam Hussein's military set fire to the oil fields as they retreated to Baghdad. From the United States Army, public domain.

In 1991, Iraq invaded Kuwait. The Iraqis claimed that Kuwait was draining the oil from under both countries. The United States responded by invading Iraq. In 2003, the Americans again invaded Iraq. One motivation was American control of Iraqi oil fields.

Banana republic—Not a clothing store

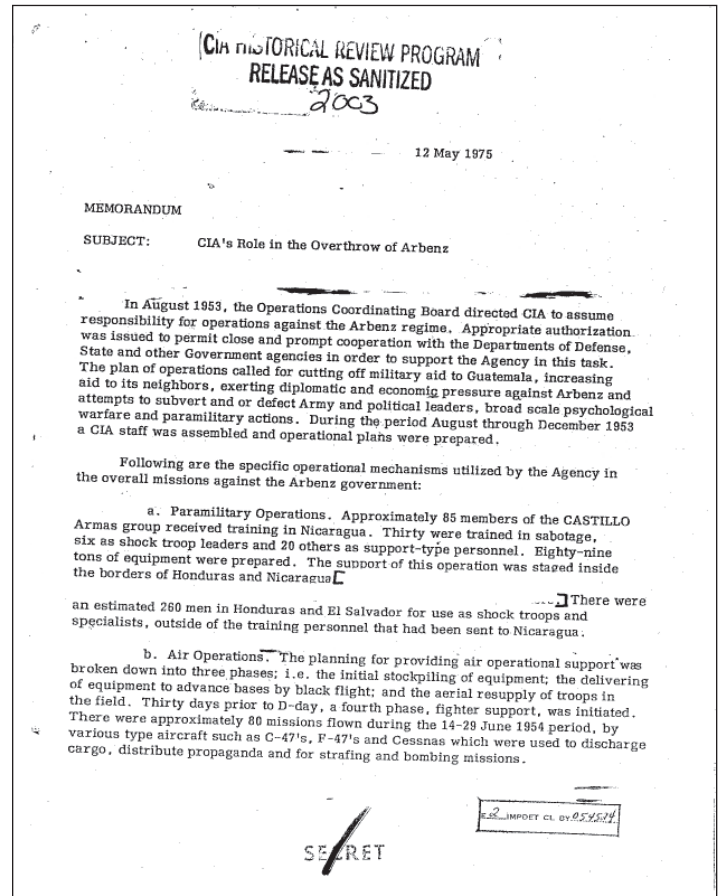
The humble banana has also provoked violent conflicts. Multinational corporations have turned huge profits from banana crops in the twentieth century. And they have violently defended those profits. For example, United Fruit was a U.S. company. It made billions of dollars growing bananas in Central and South America. In the process, the company paid off politicians. It hired thugs to terrorize workers. They even helped to overthrow governments.

In 1954, Jacobo Arbenz, the newly elected president of Guatemala, nationalized land owned by United Fruit. It was turned over to peasants. In response, United Fruit executives called their friends in the American government. The CIA bombed Guatemala's capital and initiated a coup that drove Arbenz from the country. The result: Fifty years of struggle and the deaths of 200,000 workers and peasants as they fought one dictator after another.

Conclusion

These scenes have played out across the globe. Powerful corporations have claimed the best land to grow cash crops such as bananas, coffee, tea, and cocoa. They are then consumed by wealthier people in other countries. The poor are forced onto less productive land or into crowded cities. There, cycles of poverty continue. Some people rebel against the corrupt politicians who profit from this system. Meanwhile, the wealth of their nation flows to foreign corporations.

Which leads us back to water. The number of conflicts over water access is growing as drinkable water becomes scarcer. Will the rich nations of the world drain water from poorer countries as they have with most other resources? Will common people fight for the right to clean water? These and other questions will become more important as Earth's climate changes.



[CIA memorandum describing the agency's role in the overthrow of Arbenz](#). From the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, public domain.

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Jeff Spoden is a retired social studies teacher, having been in the classroom for 33 years. He taught US history, world history, sociology, international relations, and history of American popular music.

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