

1974 All Over Again

*If one person call thee a donkey,
Pay them no mind.
If a second person call thee a donkey,
Get thee a saddle.*
—Old Yiddish Proverb

We who were born before the late sixties should remember the oil scam of 1974, right?

Remember that nasty old cabal? The Organization of the Oil Producing Countries aka OPEC? How this fat-cat oil oligarchy screwed the West, taking huge profits by choking off supply, while we poor slobs—especially those of us who lived in the northern tier of the U.S.—had to suffer through the winter of 1973-74 with precious little gasoline and heating oil.

Oh, those nasty foreigners!

Right?

Wrong.

In fact, the 1974 oil scam and that of this present gouging 31 years later have been orchestrated by the same oil oligarchs whose roots are sunk deeply in *our* nation, so don't go blaming foreign countries for the rape.

Do you not know that in the vanguard of the oil oligarchs are none other than those preeminent, petroleum patriarchs: the Rockefellers.

And think of all the personages in this current administration with ties to Big Oil. Heck, Condoleezza Rice even has a Chevron tanker named after her. I wonder if it's called the *Condosleazy*?

I remember the scene back in metropolitan New York in early 1974: queues of cars winding out from gas stations down and around city blocks. If someone tried to cut in line, they were immediately attacked. Some were shot dead. Looters came out under stealth of night and siphoned gas from cars parked on the streets and in driveways. Some scavengers went from gas station to gas station draining the residue each hose held.

Then came rationing: Drivers were allowed gas depending on the last digit of their vehicles' tags: even and odd numbers designated what three days one could get gas. Since registrations were never checked, some people took to keeping a phony set of license plates to get gas every day.

No one, however, was allowed gas if the gauge showed a half-tank or more. What colorful debates were started between gas station employees and customers when they differed in their views of whether the needle was *on* or *below* the halfway mark.

Those oil scam days of 1974 also elevated gas station owners to a lofty status they have never again reached in the 31-years passed.

During those months, if a station owner was seen eating out, his meals were paid for by lawyers, politicians, by captains of business and industry. Women offered him certain favors if they could slip in any day they wished just to top off the tank.

I remember, too, hearing talk that our armed forces should go over to the Middle East and seize the Saudi Arabian oil fields. I mean, how dare these Bedouins bring us to our knees by choking off the black gold spigot.

Then I realized it was a scam and that there was plenty of complicity on our side of the Atlantic.

I became aware of what was really going on while I was attending Jersey City State College in that winter of 1974. It was the deepest point of the freeze. Gas stations had gone dry. People were running out of heating fuel. Some of the elderly froze to death in their houses.

“Where is the oil?” people asked. “When is it coming?”

While this deprivation was going on, I and three classmates carpoled to school, each taking a turn driving. We drove down to Roosevelt Stadium, a big cement-and-brick structure built by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. Its expansive parking lot was where we commuters left our cars. The stadium complex stood at the head of Newark Bay on whose west bank, in clear view of the stadium lot, loomed the Exxon refineries of Linden, New Jersey.

One Monday morning we saw an oil tanker pull up alongside the offloading dock. We felt relieved. Gas was on the way!

But, alas, no gas was delivered.

The next day a second tanker pulled in behind the first.

No gas, however, had yet hit the streets.

A day later, a third tanker pulled in. The next day, a fourth.

Still no gas.

On Friday morning’s drive to school, we listened to the top-of-the-hour news. The lead story? A massive spike in gas prices had occurred overnight. We slumped in our seats. How far would this go? Would the prices ever come down?

When we reached the stadium parking lot, we didn’t bother to look over to the refineries. Nothing ever changed, except that another tanker had shown up in the bay. As we boarded the shuttle bus that took us to campus, one of my classmates shouted, “Look at that,” and pointed toward the refineries.

The first tanker was on its way out of the bay, the second was offloading product.

On the short trip to school, we had figured it out: There was and had never been any oil shortage. There was plenty of petroleum out there, it was just being held back until the price had been jacked up big-time.

So what’s changed? It’s 2005, but it’s 1974 all over again.

I told myself back during Oil Scam I that I’d never forget what the oil oligarchs did because the scumbuckets would do it again. And they have. Last time they went for our throats. This time they’re going for the jugular.

Well, I never forgot. And I knew they’d do it again. So while my fellow Americans bought bigger and bigger cars and trucks, I stayed with four-cylinder economy vehicles. As I watched the vehicle down-sizing of the seventies be steadily reversed in the eighties, and as I watched carburetors—which once attained the pinnacle of 50 miles per gallon—suddenly manage no more than 12, I remained content with my little vehicles.

I’m not saying families don’t need a station wagon or van, but few really *need* a sports utility vehicle, especially in regions where it doesn’t snow. In many cases, the SUV is more about status and the “mine-is-bigger-than-yours” mentality.

Well, Oil Scam II is here. The mother of all scams. Contrived shortages and price spikes occurring seemingly by the heartbeat.

And though the oil oligarchs have stuck it to us again, they couldn't have done nearly as much damage if we also hadn't stuck it to ourselves.

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