

US loses control in the calm before a new desert storm

Commentary

Martin Woollacott

ONE wonders how often General Colin Powell, General Norman Schwarzkopf, and former President George Bush return in their minds to that euphoric morning in February, 1991, when the American leader, with the support of his senior military men, decided to round off the Gulf War in exactly 100 hours. It had a nice ring to it, but it is a subject of desperate regret today. "If it had been our intention to overrun the

country we could have done it unopposed, for all intents and purposes," Schwarzkopf said at his final press conference of the war. Perhaps it would not have been that easy militarily, and perhaps it was not politically possible, given the state of public opinion at the time and the prevailing view that Saddam would either soon fall or, if he survived, would be so weakened and toothless as to constitute a danger to no one. But, if only. The United States and its allies thought they could leave Saddam Hussein to twist in the wind, but they let him live to fight another day. As a result of that decision, and of the failures that have followed, there may soon have to be a dismal choice between appeasing Saddam and making a sustained aerial attack on Iraq. The UN Security Council has threatened the Iraqi regime

with "serious consequences" but, in truth, the serious consequences will affect everybody, including America and Britain. Some of those consequences are already apparent. They are with us in the shape of a dangerous split within the post-cold-war order, which envisaged permanent co-operation between North America, Russia and Europe, acting together to keep the peace. It is ironic that the break has come not over Nato structures and expansion, but over how to deal with the rogue states — Iraq, Iran, Libya and others — which the United States wants to sanction and isolate but appears unable to actually vanquish by fair means or foul. The consequences are above all with us in the fragile nature of that American ascendancy in the Middle East which, for want of any-

thing better, is what passes for stability in that region. If there is one man who is as responsible as Saddam for the decline of American influence there it is Benjamin Netanyahu, in London this last week to meet Robin Cook and Madeleine Albright. His abandonment of substantive negotiations with the Palestinians has undermined those Arab regimes which had put their trust in the United States. Between Israelis and Palestinians themselves, the obstacles he has created are less important. There is a certain inexorable process of adjustment going on between Israelis and Palestinians, which seems to continue beneath all the anger and violence. But, externally, it is a different matter. The reason why America can now find no support amongst Arabs for action against Iraq is not that these governments have any

love for the Baghdad regime but that the United States has failed to deliver what it in effect promised in the years after 1991. The US set itself, immediately or somewhat later, an extraordinary range of objectives — to isolate, contain, and sanction Iraq, Iran and Libya with a view to changing their regimes or at least altering their behaviour, to manage a peace negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians, and try to extend that into a general peace settlement, and to help transform the economic landscape of the Middle East. It had hopes, in addition, of ameliorating the difficulties between Turkey and Greece, and solving the Cyprus problem, and it later took on much responsibility for ending hostilities in Bosnia. This was a truly ambitious plan for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, but with the credit of the Gulf victory in hand and the disappearance of the Soviet Union as an actor and opponent, it seemed not impossible that some at least of it would come to pass. But the results have been meagre, the Arab states have lost confidence, and are now understandably reluctant to put their bets on the table with such an inept or unlucky player as in their view America has so far turned out to be. Apart from anything else, all have to cope with an anti-

Israeli, anti-American constituency inside their own countries. Their dilemma is most clearly seen in the case of King Hussein. Once the Arab leader who tried, in the days before the Gulf War, to mediate between the West and Saddam, he crossed over fully to the anti-Iraqi camp at about the same time as he committed himself fully to the peace process. He is now a doubly betrayed figure, looking east to see a hard Iraqi enemy whom he had been assured again and again would be removed, and looking west to see an Israeli leader who had so little respect for him and his problems as to ar-

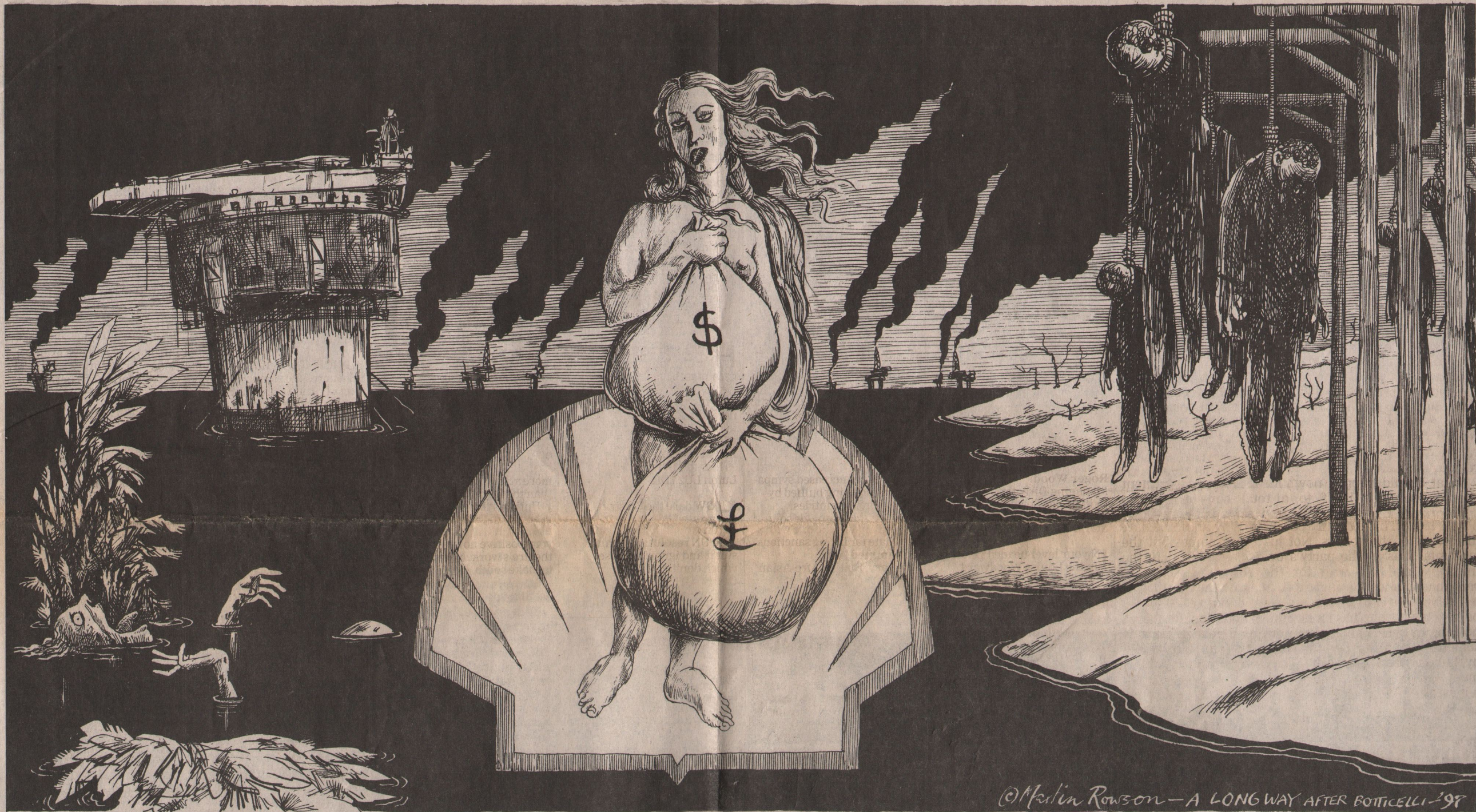
could find themselves battering Iraqi targets with missiles and bombs. They might have to go on doing it, if the regime treats the first attacks with contempt. The United States might decide, anyway, that this time an attack must be aimed at Saddam himself and his key military assets, a risky course with no assurance of success. The conflict might then lurch in dangerous directions. These could include Iraqi attempts against regional American military targets. One cannot be absolutely certain that these would not come, or would be feeble and unsuccessful. Sad-

dam could move against the Kurds, whose divisions continue to offer him an opportunity to enter the northern zone, with some apparent legitimacy, as the ally of one faction or another. That would be disastrous for the Kurds, and a humiliation for the United States. More likely, perhaps, is that Iraq will avoid both retaliation and concession, and look to its "friends" — Russia, France, China, some of the Arab countries — to organise a "compromise". We would have the unpleasant possibility of the Iraqis seeing off a few attacks, apparently agreeing to talks about the resumption of weapons inspections, and then stonewalling for months while, among other things, they could make operational some of the mass destruction weapons they undoubtedly have, and hope to gradually bore their way through to the final goal of a lifting of sanctions. The fiasco of the Doha Middle Eastern economic conference this weekend, which will be attended by neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia, illustrates how limited American influence has in a way become. Yet American policy and purpose is still very much the defining element in the Middle East, the centre around which countries and leaders manoeuvre, and Washington does still have a degree of control. That control, however, is slipping, not least because of Saddam. Professor Lawrence Freedman, co-author of the best history of the Gulf War, wrote that just as Saddam's ability to continue to control Iraq politically after the conflict was a surprise, so "his eventual downfall would also come as a surprise". We may take some comfort from that, because there is not much available elsewhere.

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range a major assassination attempt in the Jordanian capital. An American attack on Iraq this time, unlike on previous occasions, could lead to a conflict which would make the Gulf War seem simple. This would not be a matter of allied tanks charging through the desert. There is no occasion, nor is there stomach, for that. If the Iraqis do not respond to diplomatic moves, the United States and Britain

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Unloveable Shell, the goddess of oil

For a century, Shell has explored the Earth to make our lives more comfortable. But in its wake, says **Andrew Rowell**, lies a trail of corruption, despoliation and death

THE QUEEN and the Duke of Edinburgh went to the Shell Centre on the Thames riverside near Waterloo last Tuesday, to crown the company's centenary celebrations. Critics claim the timing of the Queen's visit was slightly unfortunate: it came just one day after the second anniversary of Ken Saro-Wiwa's death in Nigeria: he was campaigning against Shell's oil exploitation in the region. The Shell Transport and Trading Company (STTC) has risen from its humble roots in a cramped office in the East End to become one of the most successful corporations of the century. What we collectively know as "Shell" is in fact more than 2,000 companies. Last year, the Shell Group's profit was a record £5.7 billion, the proceeds from sales of £110 billion. "Were our founder, Marcus Samuel, to reappear today, I do not think he would be displeased with what has grown from his efforts," says Mark Moody-Stuart, STTC's chairman. As part of the centenary celebrations, the cream of the City were invited to a reception at the Guildhall. There is also to be a commemorative book. Whilst it may mention the Shell Better Britain Cam-

paign, and even the controversy over Brent Spar, not everyone will agree with the authorised biography's version of Shell's history. Here is a less authorised approach. After it merged in 1907 with its rival Royal Dutch, the Royal Dutch Shell company was formed; its first chairman was the Dutchman Henri Deterding. By the 1930s, Deterding had become infatuated with Adolf Hitler, and began secret negotiations with the German military to provide a year's supply of oil on credit. In 1936, he was forced to resign over his Nazi sympathies. During the early 1940s, as the world waged war, Peru and Ecuador had their own armed border dispute — over oil. Legend in Latin America says that it was really a power struggle between Shell, based in Ecuador, and Standard Oil in Peru. The company left a lasting reminder of its presence in the country: a town called Shell. Activists in Ecuador are seeking to get the town renamed Saro-Wiwa. In the post-war years, Shell manufactured pesticides and herbicides on a site previously used by the US military to make nerve gas at Rocky Mountain near Denver. By 1960 a game warden from the

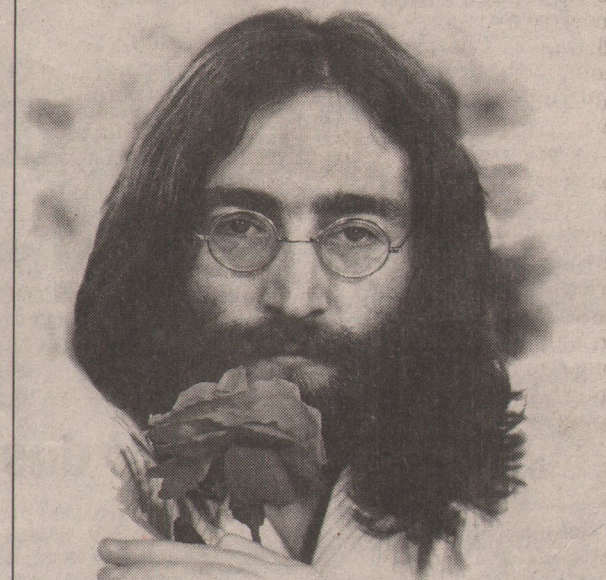
Colorado Department of Fish and Game had documented abnormal behaviour in the local wildlife, and took his concerns to Shell, who replied: "That's just the cost of doing business if we are killing a few birds out there. As far as we are concerned, this situation is all right." But the truth was different. "By 1956 Shell knew it had a major problem on its hands," recalled Adam Raphael in the Observer in 1993. "It was the company's policy to collect all duck and animal carcasses in order to hide them before scheduled visits by inspectors from the Colorado Department of Fish and Game." After operations ceased in 1982, the site was among the most contaminated places on the planet, although Shell is now trying to make it into a nature reserve. At Rocky Mountain, Shell produced three highly toxic and persistent pesticides called the "drins": aldrin, dieldrin and endrin. Despite four decades of warning over their use, starting in the 1950s, Shell only stopped production of endrin in 1982, of dieldrin in 1987 and aldrin in 1990, and only ceased sales of the three in 1991. Even after production was stopped, stocks of drins were shipped to the Third World. Another chemical Shell began manufacturing in the 1950s was DBCP, or 1,2-Dibromo-3-Chloropropane, which was used to spray bananas. This was banned by the US Environmental Protection Agency in 1977 for causing sterility in workers. In 1990, Costa Rican workers who had become sterile from

working with the chemical sued Shell and two other companies in the Texan Courts. Shell denied that it ever exported the chemical to Costa Rica and denied that it exported it to any other country after the ban in 1977. The case was settled out of court. Just as people had begun to question Shell's products, so they began to challenge its practices. In the 1970s and 1980s, Shell was accused of breaking the UN oil boycott of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) by using its South African subsidiary and other companies in which it had interests. Shell, singled out by anti-apartheid campaigners for providing fuel to the notoriously brutal South African army and police, responded by hiring a PR firm to run an anti-boycott campaign. BY THE 1980s criticism of Shell's operations was spreading. From Inuit in Canada and Alaska, to Aborigines in Australia and Indians in Brazil, indigenous communities were affected by Shell's operations. In the Peruvian rainforest, where Shell conducted exploration activities, an estimated 100 hitherto uncontacted Nahua Indians died after catching diseases to which they had no immunity. Shell denies responsibility, and says that it was loggers who contacted the Nahua. By the end of the decade, the company's image was suffering in the US and UK, too. In April 1988, 440,000 gallons of oil was discharged into San Francisco Bay from the company's Martinez refinery, kill-

ing hundreds of birds. The following year, Shell spilt 150 tons of thick crude into the River Mersey, and was fined a record £1 million. But by now, the company was responding to growing international environmental awareness. "The biggest challenge facing the energy industry is the global environment and global warming," said Sir John Collins, head of Shell UK, in 1990. "The possible consequences of man-made global warming are so worrying that concerted international action is clearly called for." Shell joined the Global Climate Coalition, which has spent tens of millions of dollars trying to influence the UN climate negotiations that culminated in Kyoto next month. "There is no clear scientific consensus that man-induced climate change is happening now," the lobbyists maintain, two years after the world's leading scientists agreed that there was. At the same time, the company has taken its own preventive action on climate change and possible sea-level rise by increasing the height of its Troll platform in the North Sea by one metre. By 1993, as Shell's spin-doctors were teaching budding executives that "ignorance gets corporations into trouble, arrogance keeps them there", 300,000 Ogoni peacefully protested against Shell's operations in Nigeria. Since then 2,000 have been butchered, and countless others raped and tortured by the Nigerian military. In the summer of 1995 there was the outcry over the planned deep-sea sinking of the redundant oil platform Brent Spar, and in November Ogoni leader Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed, having been framed by the Nigerian authorities. At the time Shell denied any financial relationship with the Nigerian military, but has since admitted paying them "field allowances" on occasion. This year in Nigeria, the three-million-strong Ijaw community started campaigning against Shell, leading to

another military crackdown. "The military governor says it is for the purpose of protecting the oil companies. The authorities can no longer afford to sit by and have the communities mobilise against the companies. It is Ogoni revisited," says Uche Onyea-gucha, representing the opposition Democratic Alternative. In Peru, Shell has returned to the rainforest. It acknowledges "the need to consider environmental sustainability and responsibility to the people involved", but the move is still criticised by more than 60 international and local environmental, human-rights and indigenous groups. "Shell has not learnt from its tragic mistakes," says Shannon Wright from the Rainforest Action Network, which believes there should be no new fossil-fuel exploration in the rainforest: "They continue to go into areas where there are indigenous people who are susceptible to outside diseases." Meanwhile, Shell publicly talks of engaging "stakeholders". It hopes that we, as consumers, will continue to give it a licence to operate. However, for each barrel produced, the ecological and cultural price increases exponentially. Everyone knows we need to reduce our consumption of oil: but Shell's very existence depends on selling more of it. Senior executives are said to be "girding our loins for our second century" because "the importance of oil and gas is likely to increase rather than diminish as we enter the 21st century". Can we let that happen?

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THIS WEEK'S essayist, Andrew Rowell, is a freelance environmental consultant who has written extensively on the oil industry. He is author of **Green Backlash — Global Subversion Of The Environmental Movement** (Routledge, 1996)

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