

If the world ran on sun, it wouldn't fight over oil

[Bill McKibben](#)

The climate crisis isn't the only reason to kick fossil fuels – the prospect of a war to protect Saudi crude reminds us of that

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We are sadly accustomed by now to the idea that our reliance on oil and gas causes random but predictable outbreaks of flood, firestorm and drought. The weekend's [news from the Gulf](#) is a grim reminder that depending on oil leads inevitably to war too.

Depending on how far back you want to stand, the [possibility of war with Iran](#) stems from a calculated decision by Tehran or its Houthi allies to use drones and missiles on Saudi installations, or on the infantile rage that drove President Trump to tear up a meticulously worked out and globally sponsored accord with Iran and to wreck its economy. But in either case, if you really take in the whole picture, the image is rendered in crude, black tones: were it not for oil, none of this would be happening.

Were it not for oil, the Middle East would not be awash in expensive weapons; its political passions would matter no more to the world than those of any other corner of our Earth. Were it not for oil, we would not be beholden to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – indeed, we might be able to bring ourselves to forthrightly [condemn its savagery](#). Were it not for oil, we would never have involved ourselves in a ruinous war with Iraq, destabilising an entire region. (I remember the biting slogan on a sign from an early protest against the war with Saddam Hussein: “How did our oil end up under their sand?”)

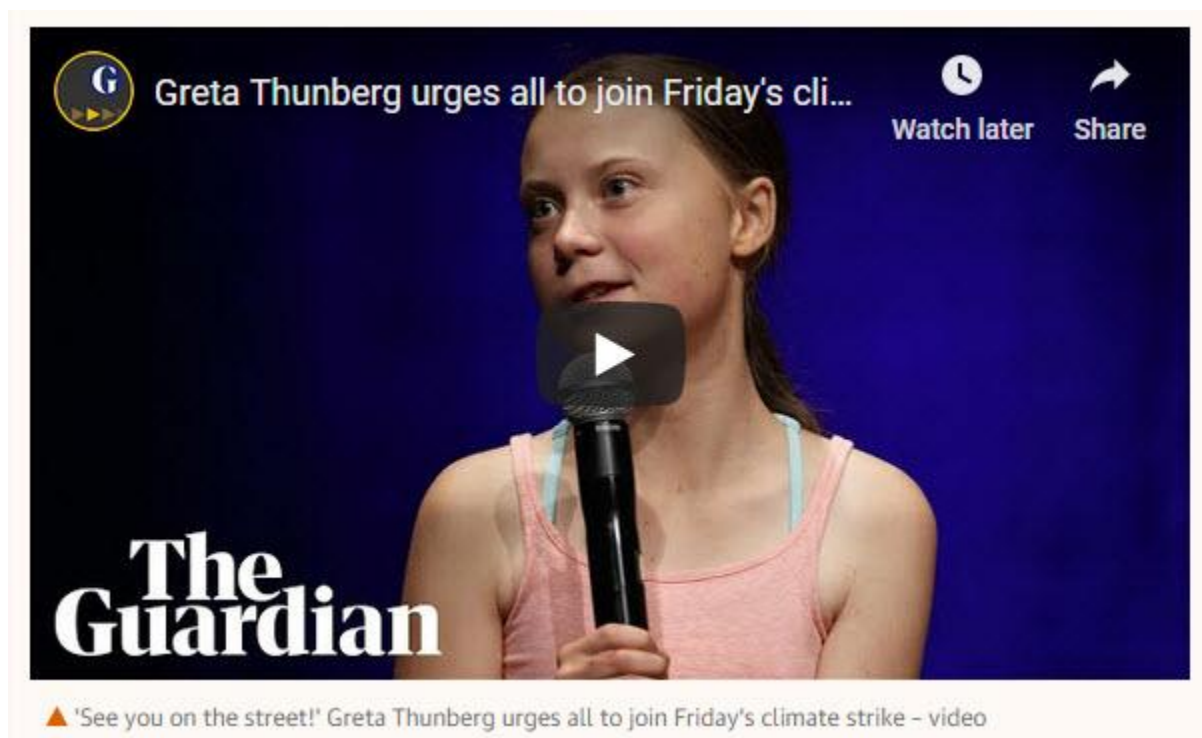
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We've come to take for granted that this is how the world works. Within hours of the pictures of devastated oilfields, we had “explainers” from our various news outlets reminding us of the realities of our predicament: with Aramco largely offline, the world's spare capacity was mostly gone. Hence [oil prices would spike upwards](#). Hence there would be damage to the world's economy. Reporters quoted gloating Revolutionary Guards from Iran and concerned Opec officials, and stock analysts waiting breathlessly to see how Wall Street would react. The drama seemed choreographed because we've seen it so often that everyone knows their parts.

But this iteration of the opera is different in one way. An unspoken truth hangs over the whole predictable scene: this will be the first oil war in an age when we widely recognise that we needn't depend on oil any longer.

The last time we started down this path, in Iraq more than 15 years ago, a solar panel cost 10 times what it does today. Wind power was still in its infancy. No one you knew had ever driven an electric car. Today the sun and the breeze are the cheapest ways to generate power on our Earth, and Chinese factories are churning out electric vehicles. That is to say, we have the technology available to us that would render this kind of warmongering transparently absurd even to the most belligerent soul.

We haven't come close to fully deploying that technology, of course – and unlike 15 years ago we understand why. Thanks to great investigative reporting, we now know that the [oil industry knew all about climate change](#) decades ago, but instead of acknowledging it and helping us move to a new energy future, they instead spent billions building the scaffolding of deceit and denial and disinformation that kept us locked in the present paradigm. Just as they have profited from sea-level rise and Arctic melt, so they will profit from the war now starting to unfold. (Right on schedule, the share prices of fracking firms and oil majors all jumped perkily northwards on Monday morning.)



If it happens, this war, like the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, will cost untold lives, most of them civilian. It will also, like those conflicts, cost trillions of dollars. Imagine if we had spent those trillions of dollars not on cruise missiles and up-armoured Humvees, but on solar farms and offshore wind turbines. Imagine if we'd stuck insulation in the walls of every building in the US, and built a robust network of electric vehicle chargers.

That's not a fanciful vision – it's exactly what legislation such as the [Green New Deal](#) envisions in the US – and indeed there are very similar proposals in the UK and Canada, and across the EU. But we are told that the Green New Deal is an impossibly expensive boondoggle – by precisely the same people now eager to pour blood and treasure down a hole in the desert. A trillion dollars spent on war returns nothing except trauma and misery; a trillion dollars spent on solar panels leaves behind a nation that gets its power for free each morning when the sun comes up.

That new world is coming – in fact, you can sense its arrival in the somewhat muted reaction to the oilfield drones and missiles. Yes, the price of oil “spiked”. But it's still historically low, because the planet is awash with oil – and that's in part because demand growth has begun to soften. The day will come when blocking the [strait of Hormuz](#) or blowing up a petrol station will be an empty threat – and that will be a good day indeed.

We can speed up that process immeasurably by pushing our [politicians to act much faster](#) on the transition to clean energy. There's no mystery about the necessary steps. Big support for renewables, rigorous “keep it in the ground” policies, making polluters pay for the damage they've done: pretty much precisely the plans the Democrats are rolling out as they campaign. But we need the will to make these things actually happen.

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Conveniently, the [largest ever demonstrations](#) about energy policy are scheduled to take place this Friday. The climate strikes touched off by Greta Thunberg and her young colleagues around the world go multigenerational on 20 September (you can find the closest ones to you at [globalclimatestrike.net](#)). They are designed to deal with the greatest existential threat humans have ever faced: the rapid heating of our Earth. But they also serve as a chance to say no to this and other oil wars. We have to do it fast – if we don't, we'll just go from fighting wars over oil to fighting wars over survival on a fast-degrading planet.

No one will ever fight a war over access to sunshine – what would a country do, set up enormous walls to shade everyone else's panels? (Giant walls are hard to build – just ask Trump.) Fossil fuels are concentrated in a few places, giving those who live atop them enormous power; renewable energy can be found everywhere, the birthright of all humans. A world that runs on sun and wind is a world that can relax.

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