

The Thinking Man's Oil Coup

By DANIEL PIPES

"The countries of the [Persian] Gulf can best be compared to a group of irascible millionaire paraplegics coasting down 116th Street in Harlem in golden wheelchairs at four in the morning. They're wearing guns they don't know how to use; they're being pushed by poverty-stricken attendants whom they despise; and their main hope of protection lies in the timely use of a police whistle. Now there's no way in the world that they're going to make it down that street without losing those chairs and ending up in the gutter. The only question is who will do the mugging: the neighborhood bad guys, the attendants, or the police? Since each of these three is uncertain about the plans and capabilities of the other two, however, the millionaires manage to keep going."

Thus does Carl Webster, the hero of Richard Bulliet's fine new novel, "The Gulf Scenario" (St. Martin's Press, 223 pages, \$12.95), understand the situation in the Persian Gulf today. Webster should know: As the leading strategist at a Harvard think tank, his job is to puzzle out probable dangers facing the U.S. around the world. To this end, Webster devises a plan to show "how the poor attendants can make off with the gold without being clobbered by rival muggers."

In more specific terms, he means the following: The eight million or so Arabs living in six countries along the Persian Gulf—Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman—earn about \$90 billion a year from oil exports. Much of this money is wasted. In contrast, the 820 million people living in Pakistan and India have almost no oil resources and are racked by poverty. Webster finds it "simply wrong for so incredibly much money to be hogged by those few Arabs while tens of millions of Indians and Pakistanis live in poverty. . . . The Arabs in the Gulf don't allow foreign workers [including millions from Pakistan and India] to become citizens and share the wealth; they're stingy with gifts; and they flaunt their money everywhere in the world. . . . They deserve what they get."

To help rectify this wrong, Carl Webster comes up with "Gulfscene III," a scenario that shows how Pakistan and India, if they overcame their mutual suspicion and antipathy, could take over the six oil-rich Arabian countries. Pakistan brings three strengths to this project: As Moslems, its leaders could claim to represent Islam and give the takeover legitimacy; its laborers and soldiers already in the Gulf could man the actual coup, and as an ally of the U.S., it could expect relative forbearance from this country. India also possesses three germane strengths: atomic weapons to intimidate the Gulf leaders into surrendering; emigre laborers and soldiers of its own, and a Soviet connection that would smooth the feathers of the U.S.S.R.

Together, Webster argues, Pakistan and India can achieve what neither can do on its own: annex the Gulf without provoking either of the superpowers. After the two

countries seize control, he suggests they split the oil revenue fifty-fifty.

Webster succeeds in convincing both the Pakistani and Indian governments of his plan and then takes charge of overseeing its execution. To his distress, however, he doesn't get authority over the operation but is kept in comfortable captivity in the Pakistani capital.

Things get complicated when the CIA tries to stop the plan. They get more complicated when Russian and British intelligence become involved, when Webster is joined in captivity by a remarkable female agent and when the two of them take an unexpected trip through Afghanistan. The climax comes as the various powers converge on the basement of an unfinished palace belonging to the ruler of Abu Dhabi where the Pakistanis have set up their command center. The story ends with a satisfying sequence of revelations.

On one level, "The Gulf Scenario" is a good read—a short, fast and well-written thriller that engages the reader. The story hangs together, the characters are full-blooded and the action is engrossing.

On other levels, "The Gulf Scenario" holds more interest than the usual thriller. The author is professor of Middle East history at Columbia University, a scholar who has made a reputation studying such topics as the medieval Iranian aristocracy and the evolution of transportation in the Middle East. He is thus singularly well



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"The Gulf Scenario"
By Richard Bulliet

equipped to write about the area; his sure touch and accurate details make a refreshing change from the many novels that mangle the Middle East in the process of describing it.

Also, Mr. Bulliet raises issues of greater import than one would expect from a thriller. Portraying the oil-rich Arabian countries as paraplegics in golden wheelchairs is harsh but not inaccurate. A place like Qatar—with a native population of about 60,000 and more than 200,000 foreign workers—is ripe for a mugging. As Mr. Bulliet suggests, a plan of action and the will to carry it through could make Pakistan, India or any number of regional or international powers ruler of the Persian Gulf's west bank.

Whatever awakens the Western world to the likelihood of drastic and extreme changes in the Persian Gulf region has an importance that transcends its other purposes. Richard Bulliet has written a spy story that is not only engaging but has timely implications.

Mr. Pipes, a lecturer on history at Harvard University, is the author of "In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power," recently published by Basic Books.