How one industry greases the squeaky wheel of corruption around the world.

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By Glenn Altschuler

Many years ago, Terry Karl, a professor of political science at Stanford University, recalls Juan Pablo Perez Alfonzo, a founder of OPEC, suggested that instead of focusing on the cartel in her dissertation, she should study what oil “is doing to us, the oil exporters.” Oil, Mr. Alfonzo exclaimed, “is the excrement of the devil.” A bit more diplomatic, but no less emphatic, Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the former minister for oil for Saudi Arabia, opined, “I wish we’d discovered water.”

In “Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth,” Rachel Maddow, news-and-commentary anchor on MSNBC, author of “Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power,” and holder of a doctorate in politics from Oxford University, provides a take-no-prisoners indictment of the oil and gas industry. Big Oil and Gas, she maintains, virtually always “serves itself while pretty much screwing everybody else.” Demanding that government get off its back (unless legislators are handing out subsidies), the industry fouls oceans, lakes, rivers and streams; induces man-made earthquakes; leaves waste in its wake; sickens school children; kills pets and farm animals; is the “chief driver” of catastrophic climate change; and “sucks the life out of democracies everywhere.”

Intended to enrage as well as engage, and to energize the progressive base, “Blowout” features Ms. Maddow’s signature sarcastic asides. After quoting the claim of U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., that, thanks to environmental safeguards and spectacular advances in drilling technology, the best place to fish is next to an oil rig, Ms. Maddow quips, “Food for thought, anyway.” Following a recitation of evidence
that Gazprom is “the worst managed company on the planet,” Ms. Maddow extends, “Congratulations, citizens of Russia ...”

Her review of Russia’s social media disinformation campaign against the Orange Revolution in Ukraine ends with, “Thank you, Facebook.” And Ms. Maddow concludes her account of a “60 Minutes” interview, in which Oklahoma fracking entrepreneur Audrey McClendon pooh-poohed allegations that the process released “nasty chemicals” into the drinking water, with “Note to self. Do not drink frac fluid. Good advice. Someone tell the cows. And the neighbors.”

That said, Ms. Maddow has done her homework. Drawing on the work of scores of investigative journalists, court records and government documents, she depicts decisions and decision makers in Texas, Oklahoma and Washington, D.C. Ms. Maddow takes readers to Putin’s Russia, where, she demonstrates, an economy wholly dependent on one industry, “run by spies or thugs or judo guys” for the benefit of the global aspirations of one man, has produced a sclerotic dictatorship. While the GDP of Equatorial Guinea, a petro-state run by the longest-serving president on the planet and an heir apparent who spends millions on Michael Jackson memorabilia, rose 5,000%, she reveals, the poverty rate did not decline, and infant mortality got worse. She does not, alas, discuss the impact of powerful oil and gas interests on democracy in Norway, an apparent exception to her thesis.

Ms. Maddow’s rogues gallery is filled to overflowing. Rex Tillerson, the former CEO of ExxonMobil, is the star of her show. Mr. Tillerson, we learn, had no qualms about pursuing corporate interests even when they undermined the stated objectives of American foreign policy. When a drilling operation in the Arctic was put on hold by sanctions imposed on Russia by the Obama administration following the annexation of Crimea, Mr. Tillerson insisted at a public forum that such measures were ineffective. As President Trump’s secretary of state, Mr. Tillerson lobbied against legislation codifying the sanctions.

Nor does Ms. Maddow spare Democratic politicians, many of whom, she indicates, have hustled to put themselves on record for energy independence. “Oil companies cannot always invest in democratically governed countries,” declared U.S. Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif. U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-La., agreed as he solicited hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes from companies seeking to do business in Africa. As he put the cash in aluminum foil in his icebox, he said that in Africa, unlike the Middle East, there was at least a chance of promoting transparency and the rule of law.

Oil and gas industry reliance on “corruption and capture,” Ms. Maddow concludes, poses an existential threat to geopolitical balance, democratic governance and the environment. “Powerful enemies,” she reminds us, “make for big difficult fights.” But “you can’t win if you don’t play.” Moreover, Ms. Maddow predicts, “democracy either wins this one or disappears.” Especially when we have no Plan(et)
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