

Agent Clooney fails to dig up the real dirt in the desert

George Clooney's new film about the oil business, *Syriana*, was released on Friday and is competing for two Oscars this evening — best supporting actor for Clooney himself and best original screenplay. The film paints a dark picture of the global oil business through the overlapping arcs of several individuals.

Clooney is Bob Barnes, a CIA agent hunting terrorists in the Middle East. A black attorney, Jeffrey Wright, taking on his first private-sector job at a well-connected Washington law firm, investigates whether the questionable business practices of two large Texan oil companies will scupper their proposed merger.

Matt Damon plays an expatriate American financial adviser and confidant of the reforming heir-apparent of an oil-rich Gulf emirate. Meanwhile, at the bottom of the industry, an unemployed young Pakistani immigrant in the same country is drawn into Islamic radicalism and terrorism.

The film, and Clooney's character in particular, is based on *See No Evil*, the memoirs of a dedicated and daring CIA veteran, Bob Baer. His odyssey saw him hunt the terrorists who kidnapped America's citizens in Lebanon,

Political point-scoring means *Syriana* gets it wrong on oil corruption, say **Peter Nolan** and **Sacha Kumaria**

destroyed its Beirut embassy, killed its soldiers in bomb attacks and blew a Pan Am airliner out of the sky over Lockerbie.

He went on to work in both Turkmenistan and with the Iraqi exiles and the Kurds who sought to overthrow Saddam Hussein from northern Iraq. Yet the final chapters of *See No Evil*, which see a frustrated Baer return to Washington, describe how weak leadership, bureaucratic infighting and corruption left the terrorists to go unpunished and blinded America to the rising threat of Al-Qaeda.

The movie's slogan, "Everything is connected", belies the film's main failing: that it is not at all reflective of the contents of Baer's book, which describes how he saw the Clinton White House put out the welcome mat for the very dirtiest people in the oil business in return for campaign

donations and fat payments to the president's cronies.

Roger Tamraz, then a fugitive from an outstanding Interpol arrest warrant for fraud, got to pitch his plan for an oil pipeline face-to-face with Bill Clinton over coffee in the Oval Office. He began his career, Baer tells us, by working to channel millions of dollars in kickbacks from an oil pipeline deal to Kamal Adham, the long-time head of Saudi intelligence, and went on to partner everyone from the Sicilian mafia to Colonel Gaddafi of Libya.

Another notorious businessman benefiting from Clinton's interventions was the commodity broker Marc Rich, who spent over a decade on the run from American justice before Clinton pardoned him just before leaving office.

Instead of depicting this history, we get a political fairytale pushing the anti-business agenda of Clooney and Stephen Gaghan, *Syriana*'s writer and director.

Imagine if the story of the journalists who investigated Richard Nixon's cover-up of Watergate, *All the President's Men*, had been filmed to show Jimmy Carter as the villain and you might get some idea of the liberties they take with the facts.

Syriana portrays the giant Amer-



Clooney in *Syriana*, which claims to take the lid off the oil trade

ican oil companies as villains, a collection of crude Texas cowboys who cheerfully admit to bribery while presenting themselves as patriots and Christians.

The international middlemen, wheeler-dealers like Tamraz and Rich, who operate with shell companies, post office boxes and a complete lack of scruples, are con-

spicuous by their absence. The tragedy of the film is the missed opportunity it represents.

Clooney and Gaghan are right to recognise corruption in the oil industry. But by attempting to score domestic political points they miss the bigger picture.

For decades the true power in the oil business has been in the

hands of governments, not the private sector.

A wave of expropriation and nationalisation in Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Kuwait in the 1970s has come to see the governments of oil exporting countries controlling over 80% of the world's reserves. Indeed, five royal families in the Middle East account for three-quarters of that alone, and the international firms remain barred from exploring, owning or operating oilfields in most Opec countries.

The title of his second book, *Sleeping with the Devil*, neatly summarises Baer's view of the oil sheikhs, who could hardly be more different from the dry engineers who predominate in the senior management of the global oil companies.

Saudi Arabia's late King Fahd spent \$5m dollars a day during his summer vacation in Marbella, and his son Prince Abdul Aziz had a sprawling palace and private amusement park built in the desert outside Riyadh at a cost of \$4.5 billion.

Yet few of the kingdom's citizens benefit from this vast natural wealth. In 1980 the Saudi gross domestic product per capita was \$20,900, nearly \$9,000 greater than America's. A generation later

it has fallen by \$8,000, and as a consequence the house of Saud faces growing domestic strife. Saudi Arabia has become a hotbed of Islamic extremism.

In a sense Gaghan and Clooney are correct — everything is connected. The international energy markets, the war on terror, the spread of democracy and liberalism in the Middle East are all complex, interwoven issues, and no film can fully represent their interplay. But the film's creators misconceive the true nature of corruption.

In the Middle East it is borne of dictatorship and it is political. With free markets in oil shut down in favour of grasping state monopolies, corruption is inevitable, facilitated by the secretive middlemen operating outside the regulations that govern American and European companies.

Neither, as the example of Osama Bin Laden and the well-educated middle-class pilots who led the 9/11 hijackings should show, does poverty directly drive terrorism. On the contrary, judging from Clooney's example, if you want to drive a man to become a radical opponent of his government, just give him millions of dollars and a house in the Hollywood hills.