The Democrats have discovered the enemy in the ongoing Iraq war. And it is Halliburton.

Nothing quite so angers Democrats about the current situation in Iraq than that Halliburton is making money there. Dennis Kucinich, the out-to-lunch leftist who sounds ever more mainstream given the leftward drift of the rest of the Democratic field, wants the United Nations in Iraq so there will be "no more Halliburton sweetheart deals." Bob Graham huffs, "I will not support a dime to protect the profits of Halliburton in Iraq." John Edwards vows "to stop this president from giving billions of dollars in American taxpayer money to companies like Halliburton in unbid contracts."

The Texas oil-services giant formerly headed by Dick Cheney, who still gets deferred compensation from the firm, has achieved iconic status. Halliburton is the equivalent of Dow, the maker of a key ingredient to napalm, during the Vietnam War -- the focus of supposed corporate evil during wartime. It is the equivalent of Mena Airport, the Arkansas site that obsessed anti-Clinton conspiracy theorists during the 1990s -- the focus of dark speculation about the mercenary scheming of a U.S. president.

Behind the Democratic outrage is the implicit, and sometimes explicit, charge that Bush waged war in Iraq to fatten the bottom line of one corporation. As The New York Times has put it, Halliburton's Iraq contract "undermines the Bush administration's portrayal of the war as a campaign for disarmament and democracy, not lucre." But to have risked his presidency -- not mention American lives -- on the war in order to benefit Halliburton, Bush would have to be a psychopath. That the Halliburton charge has become a chief Democratic critique of the war is another sign of the party's descent into unhinged ravings.

As journalist Byron York has reported, it's not really true that the company got its work without competitive bidding. In the 1990s, the military looked for ways to get outside help handling the logistics associated with foreign interventions. It came up with the U.S. Army Logistics Civil Augmentation Program, or LOGCAP. The program is a multiyear contract for a corporation to be on call to provide whatever services might be needed quickly.

Halliburton won a competitive bidding process for LOGCAP in 2001. So it was natural to turn to it (actually, to its wholly owned subsidiary Kellogg Brown & Root) for prewar planning about handling oil fires in Iraq. "To invite other contractors to compete to perform a highly classified requirement that Kellogg Brown & Root was already under a competitively awarded contract to perform would have been a wasteful duplication of effort," the Army Corps of Engineers commander has written.

Then, in February 2003, the Corps of Engineers gave Halliburton a temporary no-bid contract to implement its classified oil-fire plan. The thinking was it would be absurd to undertake the drawn-out contracting process on the verge of war. If the administration had done that and there had been catastrophic fires, it would now be considered evidence of insufficient postwar planning. And Halliburton was an obvious choice, since it put out 350 oil-well fires in Kuwait after the first Gulf War.

The Clinton administration made the same calculation in its own dealings with Halliburton. The company had won the LOGCAP in 1992, then lost it in 1997. The Clinton administration nonetheless awarded a no-bid contract to Halliburton to continue its work in the Balkans supporting the U.S. peacekeeping mission there because it made little sense to change midstream. According to Byron York, Al Gore's reinventing-government panel even singled out Halliburton for praise for its military logistics work.

So, did Clinton and Gore involve the United States in the Balkans to benefit Halliburton? That charge makes as much sense as the one that Democrats are hurling at Bush now. Would that they directed more of their outrage at the people in Iraq who want to sabotage the country's oil infrastructure, rather than at the U.S. corporation charged with helping repair it.

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