



Luke Mitchell, in the December issue of [Harper's Magazine](#) has written [an insightful piece](#) looking into the oil field industry in Iraq. An excerpt:

I had come to think of Iraq as a kind of black box. Not the black box engineers analyze after a plane crash to determine how the disaster occurred-though such a device would have some metaphoric relevance to Iraq-but rather the black box engineers speak of in describing a mechanism with a known function and an unknown method. The pig goes in one end, the sausage comes out the other, and what goes on in between is no one's business. More and more of what happens in the world happens inside black boxes. It was not very long ago, for instance, that an interested observer could look under the hood of a car and determine that, yes, gas flowed in through this line, and these ceramic plugs probably sparked that gas, and these tiny explosions — you could practically hear the individual pistons! — were probably what was spinning that shaft. Now, of course, the inside of an engine compartment is almost entirely sealed off. Gasoline goes in, motion comes out, and when that ceases to happen the engine's innermost ailments are diagnosable only by a computer, which of course is another kind of black box.

Drivers seldom think about how engines work, just as they seldom think about where they get their power. The foot goes down and the car goes forward. Easy. Indeed, discussing the source of our power has become more taboo than discussing the source of our meat, likely for similar reasons. We say the oil is a commodity. That it could be from anywhere. That it is more appropriately understood as a number on a screen, as an idea. We have allowed ourselves to believe that Iraq is not a nation-sized infrastructure with intricate workings- indeed, with many leaky pipes-but a kind of philosopher's stone, as if through our engineering prowess we had found a way to defy the laws of physics as easily as we defy the laws of war, as if we really could flatten the world with a wish or melt all that is solid into air. This is obviously not true, and it is a dangerous fantasy. The mechanism may become increasingly complex, indeed the accelerating system may blur to invisibility, but every

system must be understood before it can be controlled. And here at last, in this oil made visible, was the beginning of understanding.