

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE PEOPLE OF VALLEJO

Dear Iraqi Friends

We write this on behalf of thousands of Vallejoans to welcome you to our shared birthright of democracy, to mourn with you all the tragedies inflicted upon you by Saddam Hussein, by us, and by others, and, above all, to warn you of the dangers to your health, livelihoods, and patrimony posed foreign conglomerates such as Halliburton and Bechtel.

I urge you to keep a sharp watch on Bechtel. Our experience in Vallejo teaches us that Bechtel is not to be trusted with your painfully earned democracy or with your national wealth, be it oil or water, both of which will make Iraq a very wealthy country if both are kept in Iraqi hands to benefit the Iraqi people.

You may not yet know what we know about Bechtel. It is a highly secretive, privately-owned multi-billion dollar conglomerate whose operations and government contracts have been shielded from public scrutiny. Like Halliburton, it has extensive experience in Middle East oil extraction; and a frightening new interest in taking over and privatizing water, which, especially in the Middle East, could prove more valuable. It has disturbingly close ties to the Bush Administration in Washington (Former Secretary of State George Shultz, for example, is a prominent member of its board of directors.).

What did Bechtel do to Vallejoans to bring us to anger? In secret, they devised a plan to build a massive liquified natural gas (LNG) plant in our small town by the San Francisco Bay. They hid the dangers such a volatile operation would pose to our population of 116,000 people, many of whom lived within 3 kilometers from the site.

Knowing their plans would stir great opposition among our residents, they proceeded in further secrecy, beginning negotiations with the city government of Vallejo, only after our officials agreed to sign a "confidentiality" agreement. Shielded by that agreement from public scrutiny, Bechtel negotiated with our city officials for a year, using the time to - again secretly - line up support from the chamber of commerce and trade unions, holding out tax revenues and a few hundred jobs as enticements.

When we in the public learned last May what was happening behind our backs, it was almost too late. Within three days of the public unveiling the plan, the city government rubber-stamped the next step.

But the arrogant blue-suited bullies dispatched to Vallejo by Bechtel's San Francisco owners didn't count on the power of democracy, the power of the people. First, one solitary person stood up before the city council to object. Then, three or four, and soon a dozen. By November we had mounted a grassroots media campaign and grown to over 11,000. First, one council member broke ranks; then, the mayor; and, soon, it was clear, the remaining council members would too. Seeing the writing on the wall, Bechtel threw in the towel. Democracy had won!

And that is the lesson we wish to convey to you - democracy works. The people - YOU - can defeat the machinations of a Bechtel - or Halliburton - if only you stand your ground, protect your patrimony, and shine the light of publicity on those who would despoil it. No company, Bechtel included, can stand bad publicity in the face of an informed and mobilized public.

Our final word? Ask the hard questions that you are now empowered - no, required - by democracy to ask. Demand clear answers. And, accept only what you deem to be in your best interests.

We wish you well in that endeavor.

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Saleem,
Concerned Citizens of Vallejo
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