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**Robert Vitalis.** *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781503600904 (hardcover); 9781503632592 (paperback).

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 INTRODUCTION BY JEFFREY G. KARAM, LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
 

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Robert Vitalis's *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* is an important, thorough, and deeply engaging work. Broadly, the book rethinks debates and perceptions of the nexus between energy security and the making of U.S. foreign policy. Specifically, Vitalis offers a new and revisionist view on the nature of the U.S.-Saudi 'special relationship' as part of a broader attempt to debunk and even demystify many of the assumptions on oil scarcity and conflict that have informed U.S. grand strategy, the projection of military power in the Persian Gulf, and security concerns in the Middle East since the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> To this end, Vitalis demonstrates how policymakers, academics, activists, and think-tankers – across the political spectrum and different time horizons – have come to construct, believe, and maintain what he refers to as the myth of “oil-as-power” to justify military intervention and flawed policy choices (6).

The book, therefore, challenges the deep linkages between military intervention and the control of and access to petroleum in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula – one of the key themes underpinning current narratives of U.S. foreign policy considerations that flourished and justified the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In contrast, Vitalis argues that the focus of U.S. policymakers and national security officials on securing and protecting oil created an echo chamber that centered on 'beliefs and illusions' that motivated U.S. expansionist policies and the drive to control raw materials (6, 13, 19). By using the term 'Oilcraft,' Vitalis exposes the roots of current and 'unshakeable beliefs' about oil and geopolitics that are still invoked to justify the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula and the legitimization of flawed policy choices and wars that motivate U.S. military intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere (3). In many ways, Vitalis's latest book speaks to a recent surge in scholarship on energy policy and great-power competition over raw materials, especially oil.<sup>2</sup>

The reviewers, Rosie Bsheer, Rosemary Kelanic, and Emily Meierding, all agree that *Oilcraft* is a deeply researched and extraordinary book that refutes many myths and beliefs about oil and energy security. They also praise Vitalis's serious and meticulous attempt to center and even debunk perceptions about U.S. energy security and policy as part of a broader understanding of U.S. exceptionalism, knowledge production, and the projection of power in the Persian Gulf. All the reviewers commend Vitalis for his stern attempt to question the flawed foundations and beliefs that have sustained the “myth of oil-as-power” and his use of varied documentary sources to demonstrate the perpetuity of fears over oil and energy security.

Bsbeer notes that “in five punchy chapters, Vitalis historicizes this myth [oil-as-power], dismantles the still persuasive fictions it has enabled, and alludes to a way out of oil enchantment, or breaking the spell” of existing narratives. For Bsbeer, one of the book's merits lies in how Vitalis reminds us that justifications for going to war in order to secure raw materials as a necessary policy for maintaining power in the international system are deeply embedded in racist, colonial, and imperial history. To this end, Bsbeer writes that a discussion of raw materials in great power competition has received adequate and critical attention within scholarly and activist milieus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Vitalis's earlier work focused more closely on the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. See Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See for example David Wight, *Oil Money: Middle East Petrodollars and the Transformation of US Empire, 1967–1988* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021); Rosemary Kelanic, *Black Gold and Blackmail: Oil and Great Power Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Emily Meierding, *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Vitalis's recent scholarship has addressed how imperialism and racism informed knowledge production and education, especially how Diplomatic History and International Relations were taught, in the United States. See Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

Kelanic writes that Vitalis's extensive critique of three myths, of resource imperialism, of the 1973 oil crisis, and of oil for security that lies at the heart of U.S.-Saudi special relationship, is important to explain and understand the "stubbornness of our collective illusions about oil." Specifically, Kelanic discusses the importance of Vitalis's book in dispelling and attempting to demolish "specious beliefs about oil."

Meierding underscores the importance of Vitalis's *Oilcraft* in interrogating "the myths that shape popular thinking about oil, both in order to understand the work that these myths are doing and to avoid flawed policy choices." For Meierding, *Oilcraft* represents what Vitalis and other critics have previously done in an attempt to shift "Americans' thinking about oil" or at least to raise some awareness about the assumptions that "underpin U.S. foreign policy choices."

The three reviewers emphasize *Oilcraft*'s many important contributions to scholarly works on oil politics, energy security, U.S.-Middle East relations, military intervention, and U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf. However, they also raise some important questions, which pertain to the book's discussion of power and interstate relations, its conceptual framing and precision, and the importance and uniqueness of oil relative to other raw materials.

Against this background, Bsheer notes that Vitalis does not thoroughly discuss the nature of U.S. power and how it shaped and will continue to define the U.S.-Saudi "special relationship." Yet, she asserts that Vitalis' previous scholarship addressed more closely the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, the role of the modernizers (U.S. scholars, policymakers, and corporate executives) "of a supposedly backward desert kingdom," and why some commodities, especially the control of oil, became an integral pillar of U.S. national security.<sup>4</sup> Bsheer underlines the book's many contributions and argues that Vitalis is poking holes in dominant narratives about oil and power in the United States. Moreover, she highlights the fact that *Oilcraft* engages with "new leftists and intellectuals" who view Western oil corporations as the 'benefactors of endless wars in the Middle East' and points out why such views and narratives must be properly revisited and clarified.

Kelanic commends Vitalis for attempting to dispel many myths that continue to define the nexus between oil, security, and U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. The review nevertheless contains three key concerns with *Oilcraft*. First, Kelanic pushes back against the book's central concept, the notion of 'oilcraft.' Borrowing from Giovanni Sartori, she is critical of the book's "conceptual stretching" and asserts that a typology of what 'the core (mis)beliefs of oilcraft' and how they function could have led to much more conceptual, empirical, and analytical clarity.<sup>5</sup> Second, Kelanic takes issue with *Oilcraft*'s dismissal of how and why states fear that opponents and/or enemies "could use military force to deprive them or their allies of oil supplies crucial to fighting wars." While Kelanic accepts that states can overestimate threats to justify policy choices, she disagrees with whether Vitalis is correct in labeling these fears "as myths" or as "foolish." Third, Kelanic would have preferred that Vitalis fully support his assertions on the connections between "racism" and "oilcraft." While contending that it is fair to "criticize an author" for a book they *actually* wrote instead of what scholars *wish* the author could have done, Kelanic concurs that Vitalis's *Oilcraft* does, in fact, question and push back against the power of narratives that continue to sustain historical misrepresentations and flawed claims.

Meierding praises Vitalis for drawing connections between fear, racism, and "the fundamental forces" that determine the "psychology of imperialism." Even so, she raised three important concerns with *Oilcraft*. First, Meierding concurs with Kelanic and is unpersuaded by one of Vitalis's key arguments that "fear is a key driver of oilcraft." To this end, she notes that Vitalis's dismissive view of the importance of oil as a vital commodity in great power competition over raw materials is unconvincing and does not rest on solid empirical grounds. Second, Meierding disagrees with Vitalis's critique of the 1973-1974 oil crisis as a critical juncture or as "watershed," especially that oil shortages in the 1970s was "trauma inducing" for

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<sup>4</sup> Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.

<sup>5</sup> Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics" in *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, ed. David Collier and John Gerring (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14-15.

many people in the U.S. who “lived through the price rises, gas lines,” and chaos that ensued for a few months. Third, Meierding questions whether Vitalis’s dispelling of many myths about “oil, security, and power” will actually lead to a change in U.S. policy in the Middle East, especially with Saudi Arabia and in the Persian Gulf. Specifically, she problematizes whether the effects of ‘oilcraft’ will lead the U.S. to “leave the region [the Middle East],” mainly because the projection of U.S. military power is not solely about control of and access to oil. On this point, Meierding argues that the continued presence of U.S. military forces in the Persian Gulf could be related to denying access to “threatening states” or maintaining the status-quo, i.e., the petrodollar system. While outlining some conceptual and empirical problems with Vitalis’s assertions, she also praises Vitalis’s “continued dedication” in demystifying and debunking accepted truths about modernization, racism, and energy security.

The reviewers’ critiques of *Oilcraft* do not diminish Vitalis’s ambitious and courageous attempt to question the foundations of many persistent and widespread myths. The fundamental critiques rest on the extent to which Vitalis successfully backs up all the book’s assertions. Specifically, most of the reviewers question whether an understanding of the linkages between oil, military intervention, racism, knowledge production, and grand strategy will trigger some change in either policy circles and/or conservative or progressive research milieus. To this end, the key question is whether Vitalis’s dispelling of different “myths” that inform narratives of “oil-for-security,” the U.S.-Saudi “special relationship,” and perceptions of “energy crises” in the political economy of oil and development could actually trigger some change in U.S. decision-making and policy choices in the Middle East.

The author and the reviewers are to be thanked for offering a spirited and engaging discussion, especially given that three reviewers have recently published stellar books on many of the research tropes and issues that Vitalis tackles in *Oilcraft*.<sup>6</sup> In his response, Vitalis briefly restates the purpose and main objective of the book as one that seeks to elucidate how a number of false beliefs and myths on oil and energy security have militarized U.S. foreign policy. He thanks the reviewers for the detailed and rich exchange on the book’s empirical and theoretical contributions and responds to some of the criticism raised by the reviewers. Vitalis writes that *Oilcraft* is a “highly personal journey” and in, many ways, a reading of his past as a “leftist scholar of Middle Eastern political economy.”<sup>7</sup> Apart from this personal note and his engagement with the reviewers’ criticisms, Vitalis remains unconvinced by Kelanic and Meierding’s defense of oil as a strategic good and their arguments as to why it is perceived to be different from other commodities. Importantly, Vitalis argues that constructed myths about oil, power, and security paralleled knowledge production, especially in the works of the “founders of the fields of international relations, security studies, and geopolitics in the United States.”<sup>8</sup> Vitalis explains that the Korean War triggered fears of shortages in “all kinds of raw materials” that became vital to and synonymous with U.S. national security goals and interests. The author also explains that a close reading of some archival records suggests that Soviet threats to control oil in the Persian Gulf were inflated and not entirely credible. Moreover, Vitalis views the relationship between China and the U.S. and the “highly unlikely conflict” over resources as one that can be mitigated through different measures that “Chinese officials” and others are taking to “reduce vulnerability so supply disruptions” of many materials, including oil and other resources.

The reviewers’ comments and criticisms demonstrate that Vitalis has successfully tackled controversial issues and dispelled many ‘truths’ about the nature of power, energy security, U.S. national security, and foreign policy in the Middle East. This courageous line of scholarly inquiry, detailed analysis, and use of varied documentary sources will undoubtedly inspire and

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<sup>6</sup> See Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Kelanic, *Black Gold and Blackmail*; Meierding, *The Oil Wars Myth*.

<sup>7</sup> See Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Republished in 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* for a wider discussion of this assertion.

encourage scholars, activists, and maybe even policymakers to follow suit and question the foundations of many prevalent beliefs on oil, especially ones that continue to reverberate within policy and think tank circles.

**Participants:**

**Robert Vitalis**, a professor of political science, is the author of *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (University of California Press, 1995), *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford University Press, 2005), *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2015), and *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt US Energy Policy* (Stanford University Press, 2020). He is currently researching the rise of the militant right in U.S. national security studies.

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**Rosie Bsheer** is Assistant Professor of History at Harvard University. She received her Ph.D. in History from Columbia University (2014) and comes to Harvard from Yale University, where she was Assistant Professor of History for four years. Rosie's publications include *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford University Press, 2020) and "A Counterrevolutionary State: Popular Movements and the Making of Saudi Arabia," *Past and Present* (2018). She is a contributing editor of the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East (CSSAME)*, Associate Producer of the 2007 Oscar-nominated film *My Country, My Country*, and a co-editor of *Jadaliyya* E-zine. She is currently working on the history of private property in Saudi Arabia.

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**Emily Meierding** is an assistant professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Her book, *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and Causes of International Conflict*, was recently published by Cornell University Press (2020). Her energy-related research has also appeared in *Security Studies*, *Energy Research & Social Science*, *Foreign Policy*, *Lawfare*, and *The Washington Post*.

## REVIEW BY ROSIE BSHEER, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Is the United States an imperial power? This question took center stage in public and scholarly debates in the United States in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). For domestic and global victims of the extension of U.S. power abroad, the question itself was troubling, if not altogether offensive. After all, millions have, for the better part of a century, suffered its consequences. Yet in the United States, this polar question was a serious one. Academics spilled much ink on it in those early years of the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> So too did journalists, policymakers, and public intellectuals.<sup>10</sup> So contentious was the issue that television talk shows that criticized the nature of U.S. state power or the United States' impending imperial decline were banned from the country, as were several non-U.S. academics.<sup>11</sup> Even U.S. citizens—artists and filmmakers—were surveilled and harassed for doing the same. The term “empire” had become a pejorative during the Vietnam War and with the growth of anti-colonial movements worldwide. The intellectuals, policymakers, and gatekeepers of the U.S. government worked to disguise the nature of U.S. global power, spinning it in seemingly neutral if not positive terms. Instead of empire, they recast the United States as the world's policeman, a country that was anticolonial at its core. In this role, the U.S. (allegedly) protected the world against human rights abuses while ensuring the proper functioning of the (so-called) free market. U.S. imperial power thus became increasingly more invisible for many at home, even as the Cold War made such power ever more palpable abroad. When the September 11, 2001, terror attacks and the subsequent U.S. military response laid bare such pretense, maintaining the optics of a benign U.S. state became more urgent, and consequential.

This is the U.S. exceptionalism that underlies much of Robert Vitalis's “myth-busting” academic writing, which is primarily concerned with the effects of U.S. exceptionalism on knowledge production, especially as it pertains to the government's role in the world. He argues that such exceptionalism, for instance, allowed the U.S. state and (oil) corporations to cover up both their repressive roles in Saudi Arabia and how they ultimately underdeveloped the country. Scholars, corporate executives, and policymakers were thus able to portray both as the modernizers of a supposedly backward desert kingdom.<sup>12</sup> This fiction still passes as truth today. In other work, Vitalis shows how this very same exceptionalism allowed for the elision

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2003); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Enseng Ho, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46:2 (2004): 210-246; Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Decline of American Power: The US in a Chaotic World* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Catherine Lutz, “Empire is in the Details,” *American Ethnologist* 33:4 (2006): 593–611; and Sheila Jasanoff, “Biotechnology and Empire: The Global Power of Seeds and Science,” *Osiris* 21:1 (2006): 273-292.

<sup>10</sup> Jimmy Carter, “The Troubling New Face of America,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2002; Charles Maier, “An American Empire?: The Problems of Frontiers and Peace in Twenty-First-Century World Politics,” *Harvard Magazine* (November/December 2002), 28–31; Michael Ignatieff, “The American Empire: The Burden,” *New York Times Magazine* (January 5, 2003), 22.; Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, “American Empire, Not ‘If’ but ‘What Kind,’” *Brookings*, May 10, 2003; Roger Cohen, “The World: The Ends of Empire; Strange Bedfellows: ‘Imperial America’ Retreats From Iraq,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 2004; G. John Ikenberry, and “Illusions of Empire: Defining the New American Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2004): 144-154.

<sup>11</sup> “State Department Ends Unconstitutional Exclusion Of Blacklisted Scholars From U.S.,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, January 20, 2010, <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/state-department-ends-unconstitutional-exclusion-blacklisted-scholars-us>; “Citizen Four’ Filmmaker Says U.S. Harassed Her,” *The New York Times*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/14/us/citizenfour-filmmaker-sues-over-air-checks.html>; and Hussain, Murtaza, “Complaints Describe Border Agents Interrogating Muslim Americans, Asking for Social Media Accounts,” *The Intercept* (January 14, 2017), <https://theintercept.com/2017/01/14/complaints-describes-border-agents-interrogating-muslim-americans-asking-for-social-media-accounts/>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

of the racism that is at the heart of U.S. power and the ways in which it in fact structured US foreign policy, its institutions, and its imperial logics.<sup>13</sup> His latest book, *Oilcraft*, centers US-Saudi relations once again, this time attending to how academics and activists, policymakers and think tankers—of all political persuasions—have come to believe in the myth of “oil-as-power” (122). In five punchy chapters, Vitalis historicizes this myth, dismantles the still persuasive fictions it has enabled, and alludes to a way out of oil enchantment, or “breaking the spell,” as he titles his last chapter.

*Oilcraft* revolves around three deeply ingrained fictions: the idea of going to war to “control” petroleum, the so-called 1973 oil crisis, and the “special” U.S.-Saudi relationship. Popular and academic arguments about military intervention for the sake of controlling either oil itself or access to this all-important commodity flourished after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Justifying going to war by the need to secure raw materials as necessary for maintaining the power of some states was not new. Vitalis reminds us that such justifications have a long and racist colonial history, one that was convincingly critiqued in the early twentieth century. Some 1920s critics of the new imperialism whose works Vitalis resurrects revealed how colonial powers in fact continued to rely predominantly on global trade, and not on their colonies, for the majority of the raw materials they needed—coal, copper, cotton, iron, palm oil, rubber, and tin, among others.<sup>14</sup> These scholars “exposed the factitious nature of many of the beliefs about the need for controlling raw materials—let alone the ability to do so” to supposedly overcome problems of scarcity, dependency, economic decline, or imperial rivalry (50). Countries that attempted or claimed to do so, accordingly, “were operating on the basis of illusions...haunted by ‘bogeys’ and ‘phantoms’” (37). In subsequent decades and through the 1960s, U.S. officials and policymakers ignored these sobering calls. If anything, they furthered the politics of fear and insecurity that drove U.S. expansionist policies based on the existential need to control raw materials.

In tracing these discourses, Vitalis reveals how the early 1970s heralded a peculiar transformation in modes of thinking about raw materials. The 1973 “crisis that never happened,” as Timothy Mitchell calls it, and the imagined oil scarcity fears it nonetheless induced served to single out petroleum as the only vital raw material thereafter, access to which the U.S. government should secure militarily if necessary.<sup>15</sup> Almost overnight, decades of arguments about the necessity of controlling a variety of essential raw materials gave way to having to tame this one commodity, which was now widely accepted as a matter of US national security.<sup>16</sup> Talk of dependency, scarcity, and the Arab oil weapon dominated. The 1973 oil price shock had nothing to do with the fiction of an Arab embargo or one by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), as energy economist M.A. Adelman then referred to it (68). The Saudi government, if anything, never cut off the supply of oil to the U.S. military, which was the single largest consumer of imported oil at the time. The price shock had everything to do with “the price and allocation controls imposed in 1971” (68), coupled with the U.S. oil quota system that sought to protect the domestic oil industry from the then-cheaper foreign oil. The Arab-Israeli War surely exacerbated it, too. These realities did not matter. Despite a plethora of recent scholarship that argues otherwise, in the popular and academic imaginations, 1973 remains a national trauma caused by reliance on foreign oil.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Edward Mead Earle, “The New Mercantilism,” *Political Science Quarterly* 40:4 (1925): 355–600; William S. Culbertson, “Problems of Raw Materials and Foodstuffs in the Commercial Policies of Nations,” Special Issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 12 (March 1924); and Parker Thomas Moon, “Raw Materials and Imperialism,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* I (July 1926): 180-187.

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom* and Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Daniel Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Elisabetta Bini, Giuliano Garavini, and Federico Romero, eds., *Oil Shock: The 1973 Crisis and its Economic Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Christopher Dietrich, *Oil Revolution: Anticolonial Elites, Sovereign Rights, and the*

The myth also persisted despite the (at the time secret) 1974 US-Saudi agreement that ensured Arab oil would not only continue to flow (that was not in question) but that would also remain denominated in U.S. dollars. Equally important for the U.S. economy, the Saudi government also agreed to recycle its oil wealth by investing in U.S. treasury bonds and other U.S. investments.

The fiction of a 1973 oil crisis, politicized as it was and remains, had palpable material and ideological effects. These (mis)shaped how policymakers, pundits, intellectuals, scholars, conservationists, and activists understood the politics of oil and attributed unimaginable powers to this one resource. Disregarding early twentieth-century critiques of the new imperialism, they raised alarms about the seemingly always-dwindling oil supplies and about foreign powers using the oil weapon against an energy-dependent United States. It took another crisis though, this time the 1979 Iranian Revolution—followed as it was by the Afghanistan War and rising fears of Soviet meddling—for advocates of the militarization of the Persian Gulf to get what they wanted. As Vitalis notes, “it required wizardry of the highest order to turn the Soviet Union—a major energy producer and exporter...—into a country allegedly running dry and, thus, with designs for ‘control’ over the oil of the Persian Gulf” (75). An embattled President Jimmy Carter nonetheless obliged. As did his successor Ronald Reagan—who, in addition, began a long U.S. tradition of arming Saudi Arabia—and George H. W. Bush after him. Energy security experts have since then played an oversized role in furthering the politics of fear in U.S. public life. They marketed the presence of substantial U.S. military forces in the Gulf as the only rational response to the exaggerated if not altogether imagined threat of oil scarcity and security. In so doing, they were building on a longer tradition of producing scarcity, and thus anxieties around it, to maintain higher oil prices, as Timothy Mitchell has convincingly argued.<sup>18</sup>

The projection of U.S. military power in the Persian Gulf was not necessary for the proper functioning of the oil economy, as many politicians, pundits, academics, and activists claim. Economists were especially aware of that. Oil, after all, is a freely traded commodity in the global market, a point that threads the book’s chapters. Vitalis, like others before him, has to reiterate the obvious.<sup>19</sup> Energy producers, especially in the mono-economies of the Gulf states, cannot survive without foreign exchange revenues which are necessary for domestic and other spending. Even the staunchest adversaries of the U.S. government will continue to sell their oil to the highest bidder (if allowed); Iran, Iraq, and Venezuela are proof of that. The author also points to the lack of evidence that anything the U.S. government has done, militarily or otherwise, has affected the supply of oil on the market to its advantage, let alone lowered or stabilized its price. If anything, the opposite was true. On the one hand, U.S. military presence in the Gulf alone “cost about as much as the Cold War did and in virtually any year exceeds the value of all oil exports from the region to the rest of the world” (18). This is without factoring in the cost of subsidizing the U.S. oil company in Saudi Arabia, Aramco. On the other hand, the sanctions or embargoes that the U.S. government imposed or supported in fact disrupted the flow of raw materials, oil included, thus leading to price hikes.

It was, and remains, as Vitalis argues, routine market operations that determined oil’s economic markers (supply/demand, price). No relationship, let alone a special U.S.-Saudi one that is imagined to have exchanged oil-for-security, could change that either. In any event, no such relationship existed. Vitalis mined the pages of the press and the relevant scholarship from the late 1940s until 2002 for any such mention, to no avail. As with the abovementioned oil fictions, a special U.S.-Saudi relationship was one that was also constructed, this time by the Saudis after the September 11 attacks. Projecting the relationship back to the infamous first meeting between a U.S. president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and a Saudi king, Abdulaziz ibn Saud, in 1945 was good for the optics of both countries. It alluded to a long relationship that had endured many trials

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*Economic Culture of Decolonization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Giuliano Garavini, *The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*.

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Adelman, *The Economics of Petroleum Supply: Papers by M.A. Adelman, 1962–1993* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993); Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); and Roger Stern, “United States Cost of Military Force Projection, 1976–2007,” *Energy Policy* 28:3 (2010): 2816-2825.



and tribulations and would thus outlive this latest one. As Saudi and U.S. archival sources I accessed evince, the 1945 meeting was largely about Palestine; there is no mention of oil in any of the meeting's transcripts or associated documents.<sup>20</sup> Like most fictions, with time and repetition, that of a special relationship based on oil-for-security became a retroactively established fact, deeply engrained in the U.S. psyche. Ordinary people but also experts and government officials regularly reference it to explain much about how the oil economy operated and why the U.S. is stuck in a “devil's bargain” with Saudi Arabia (23).

While U.S.-Saudi relations did little by way of securing access to oil or determining its price, Vitalis rightfully maintains that the relationship produced other benefits for the U.S. state. The Saudi rulers, for example, are among the world's largest purchasers of U.S. weapons. They have at times kept the U.S. arms industry, among others, afloat. The Saudis also continue to endorse dollar-denominated Gulf oil and to invest immensely in the United States. Such redistribution of wealth from the global South to the global North, which political economist Adam Hanieh recently detailed and that some of the literature on postwar Iraq concurs with, was exactly the point.<sup>21</sup> It better explains the U.S. government's foreign policies, military actions, and relationships with some of the world's dictators. Indeed, the increasing militarization of U.S. foreign policy—the “United States' empire of bases,” to quote Catherine Lutz—*aims* to secure the U.S. government's economic, corporate, political, foreign policy, military, and geostrategic interests.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, as some scholars have indicated, such military proliferation can be viewed as a sign of weakness. Since 2001, the argument goes, the U.S. empire was no longer able to rely on its hegemony and had to buttress it with the more costly U.S. military presence across the globe.<sup>23</sup> In keeping with U.S. exceptionalism, however, these logics of U.S. power needed to be concealed or sanitized to a U.S. public that for long believed in the benevolence of U.S. state power, what Lutz refers to as the “will to ignorance.”<sup>24</sup> This is where oil-as-power comes in handy. It serves to justify and legitimate, in more palatable ways, U.S. government actions abroad.

American exceptionalism, coupled with post-September 11 Saudi exceptionalism, have thus deeply distorted knowledge production on oil politics and economics, U.S. state and corporate power, U.S. foreign relations, and the Saudi regime itself. Together, these exceptionalisms enabled deeply entrenched blinders that even led intellectual powerhouses to see evidence for the fictitious oil-for-security paradigm, evidence that “cannot bear even a moment's critical scrutiny” (9). *Oilcraft* is in no way a comprehensive treatment of the topic, and it does not claim to be one. Yet it follows enough strands of thought to sufficiently poke holes in dominant narratives that still have wide purchase today. Few involved in the mythmaking industry escape Vitalis's scathing critique, from policymakers, grand strategists, think tankers, and energy security experts to scholars, intellectuals, and journalists. However, Vitalis is primarily concerned with how the oil fictions he tackles have misled activists on the left, with whom he identifies. He charges that the new leftists and their intellectuals—the likes of renowned intellectual Noam Chomsky—have accepted and internalized these fictions lock, stock, and barrel at least since the 1970s. Viewing western oil corporations as the culprits and the benefactors of endless war in the Middle East, they have called for energy independence as well as the end of fossil fuel capitalism. Such goals are in themselves problematic, according to the

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<sup>20</sup> Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008); Greg Muttitt, *Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq* (London: The Bodley Head, 2011); Adam Hanieh, *Money, Market, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Lutz, ed., *The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>23</sup> Lutz, *The Bases of Empire*; and Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (London: Verso, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Lutz, “The Psychological Ethic and the Spirit of Containment,” *Public Culture* 9:2 (1997):135-159. In “Empire is in the Details,” Lutz also calls this “anesthesia of affluence.”

author, who also takes issue with the leftist view that the presence of the U.S. military in the Gulf is an expression of U.S. hegemony and not, rather, its weakness. Such misunderstanding, he argues, is a disservice to the already-colossal fight against militarized U.S. foreign policy and all the woes it has caused, from the “decades long infatuation” with Arab dictators to the massive inequality it has wrought around the world (120).

Vitalis does not delve much into the nature of U.S. power and how, then, to understand the U.S.-Saudi relationship. His commitment here is to break the spell that ‘oilcraft’ has had on expert and non-expert alike. Unraveling some of oil’s many myths, better understanding its politics and economics, and attending to the language we use (“controlling oil”), according to Vitalis, are all imperative. Doing so will better place activists and intellectuals to “tackle the formidable bureaucratic and institutional impediments to demilitarization” (124). Yet as he quickly points out, given these impediments and the vested interests in oilcraft, truth alone is not enough. It might be useful here to invoke Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s insight that “truth will not make us free, but taking control of the production of truth will.”<sup>25</sup> Coupling a better understanding of empire with activism that is informed by critical intellectual production—and not U.S. or Saudi exceptionalism—is perhaps what is needed to dismantle the magical illusions that oil has enabled.<sup>26</sup> *Oilcraft* is only a first step in that direction, and is therefore a critical and timely intervention, a guide to how not to approach foreign policy, oil, or empire.

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<sup>25</sup> Hardt and Negri, *Empire*: 156.

<sup>26</sup> Fernando Coronil, *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

## REVIEW BY ROSEMARY A. KELANIC, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

In *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy*, Robert Vitalis tackles an issue that has long perturbed serious students of energy politics – namely, the persistence of erroneous, yet widely held, beliefs about oil that warp public perceptions and policy discourses alike. Oil is a topic about which nearly everyone thinks they know something, yet most of what they know is wrong. The sheer universality of misbelief is remarkable. Even those with advanced degrees, scholars, journalists, business-types, *New York Times* readers – that great mass of People Who Should Know Better – embrace fallacious reasoning when it comes to oil.

What explains the stubbornness of our collective illusions about oil? While Vitalis offers some ideas, he spends most of the book documenting the magical discourse that he calls “oilcraft” (in homage to “racecraft,” and ultimately, “witchcraft”) and dispelling some of its more egregious myths (6, 121-122). That exercise is important, and Vitalis undertakes it with verve. In so doing, he contributes to a growing literature that aims to demolish specious beliefs about oil.<sup>27</sup> The book identifies and critiques a dizzying array of what he considers to be wrong thinking, including beliefs as diverse as: the idea that oil is power; that depletion of global oil resources is imminent and will trigger wars; claims that the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) controls oil prices, or alternatively, that the Saudis control oil prices on behalf of the U.S. government; accusations that the U.S. government acts on behalf of Big Oil; the taken-for-granted view that the U.S. military must continue basing forces in the Persian Gulf in order to protect oil; assertions that the 2003 Iraq war was fought to secure U.S. access to oil; perennial fears that producers might refuse to sell oil to United States in peacetime for political reasons, and countless others (1-7, 19, 29-30).

The core of the book consists of three chapters that extensively critique three myths. One challenges resource imperialism, or the idea that great powers need to control access to raw materials, including but not limited to oil, to maintain their power. Another chapter critiques popular narratives about the 1973 oil crisis, which, following Adelman, Licklider, and others, he shows to be exaggerated.<sup>28</sup> A third one, a standout contribution of the book, argues that the supposed “oil for security” pact between the United States and Saudi Arabia never existed. It shines because Vitalis rigorously establishes that the relationship is newer and far thinner than typically portrayed, and especially because he convincingly traces the origin of the myth to the Bush administration’s efforts to limit the backlash against the Saudi royal family in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 (87-88, 91).

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<sup>27</sup> Morris A. Adelman, “International Oil Agreements,” *The Energy Journal* 5:3 (1984), 1-9; Roy Licklider, “The Power of Oil: The Arab Oil Weapon and the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, and the United States,” *International Studies Quarterly* 32:2 (1988), 205-226; *Political Power and the Arab Oil Weapon: The Experience of Five Industrial Nations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Morris A. Adelman, *The Genie out of the Bottle: World Oil since 1970* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); David Victor, “What Resource Wars?” *The National Interest* (November/December 2007), 48-55; Eugene Gholtz and Daryl G. Press, “Energy Alarmism: The Myths That Make Americans Worry About Oil,” (2007); “Protecting ‘the Prize’: Oil and the U.S. National Interest,” *Security Studies* 19:3 (2010), 453-485; Jeff Colgan, “The Emperor Has No Clothes: The Limits of Opec in the Global Oil Market,” *International Organization* 68:3 (2014), 599-632; Blake C. Clayton, *Market Madness: A Century of Oil Panics, Crises, and Crashes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Steve A. Yetiv, *Myths of the Oil Boom: American National Security in a Global Energy Market* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Roger Stern, “Oil Scarcity Ideology in Us Foreign Policy, 1908-97,” *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016), 214-257; Rosemary A. Kelanic, “The Petroleum Paradox: Oil, Coercive Vulnerability, and Great Power Behavior,” *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016), 181-213; Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, eds., *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the U.S. Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016); Emily Meierding, “Dismantling the Oil Wars Myth,” *Security Studies* 25:2 (2016), 258-288; *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Adelman, *Genie*; Licklider, *Political Power*; Licklider, “Power of Oil.”

One overarching flaw of the book is that its central innovation – the notion of “oilcraft” – while rhetorically clever, may be drawn too imprecisely to be used as the organizing theme of the book. Vitalis defines oilcraft extremely broadly, to encompass not just the myriad of oil-related misbeliefs themselves, but also all of the policy proposals and actual policies that flow from them, i.e., “the actions these vivid truths license – op-eds and classified memorandums, documentaries, classroom lectures, naval patrols and calls at port, journal articles, podcasts, press conferences, and protests, to name a few” (6). As a professor, I paused at the notion that classroom lectures fall into the same analytical category as naval patrols, if only to ponder whether my pedagogy falls short on pizzazz. (“My lectures do not resemble naval patrols. Am I missing something?”)

Kidding aside, that juxtaposition is a dead giveaway for conceptual stretching, the sin of broadening an idea’s meaning, in the words of Giovanni Sartori, “to vague, amorphous conceptualizations” that cover more phenomena “only by saying less, and by saying less in a far less precise manner.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Vitalis’s targets are often too many and too diverse to hang together. By defining “oilcraft” as both ideas (lectures, opinions) as well as tangible policy outcomes (naval patrols, overseas basing), the book sprawls across different levels of analysis. Granted, Sartori condemned conceptual stretching partly on the grounds of scientific positivism – claiming that nebulous ideas cannot be empirically tested – and Vitalis’ approach is political theory, not hypothesis testing. But shouldn’t it *raise* our expected standards for theoretical precision, if the project’s signal contribution *is* theory?

Achieving conceptual precision is easier said than done, and in fairness to the author, most political scientists rarely wrestle with concepts for long before galivanting off on a testing bacchanalia. Vitalis’s topic may be especially difficult to pin down. Discourses need not be logical or internally consistent; oilcraft may simply be an inherently incoherent discourse. Vitalis suggests as much by showing how it can be bent by both the ideological left and the right for competing, if not contradictory, political purposes (7). But what a contribution it would be if Vitalis could impose some shape on the tangled mess, for instance, by creating a typology of what the core (mis)beliefs of oilcraft are and how they function. At the very least, a sturdier conceptual architecture would help readers to understand his analytical choices – for instance, why he selected certain myths for deep critique (e.g., the 1973 oil crisis) while treating others as disparate targets at a shooting gallery (e.g., the Iraq War as “blood for oil”).

The book also goes too far in dismissing the idea that states should have *any* strategic rationale to worry about oil access – or resources more broadly (see, for example, 27, 33-34). Though many fears are overblown, circumstances do exist in which states rationally fear that enemies could use military force to deprive them or their allies of oil supplies crucial to fighting wars.<sup>30</sup> China clearly worries that the U.S. Navy could interfere with oil shipments through the Strait of Malacca in the event of a larger confrontation, for instance, over Taiwan.<sup>31</sup> While it is possible that China may be overestimating the threat, its concerns are not so obviously outlandish to warrant dismissing them as myths. Even the United States – which has produced, cumulatively, more oil than any other country – feared during the Cold War that the Soviets could interdict oil exports from the Middle East to weaken NATO’s military ability to fight a conventional war in Europe. Vitalis dismisses those fears as foolish, but a close reading of the case suggests they were reasonable.<sup>32</sup> Today, arguably, no comparable threat

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<sup>29</sup> Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics” in *Concepts and Method in Social Science: The Tradition of Giovanni Sartori*, ed. David Collier and John Gerring (New York: Routledge, 2009), 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> Kelanic, “Petroleum Paradox.”

<sup>31</sup> Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: The Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Naval Blockade of China,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36:1 (2013), 385-421; Llewelyn Hughes and Austin Long, “Is There an Oil Weapon? Security Implications of Changes in the Structure of the International Oil Market,” *International Security* 39, no. 3 (2014/2015), 152-189; Nadege Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017); Rosemary A. Kelanic, *Black Gold and Blackmail: Oil and Great Power Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), 174-82.

<sup>32</sup> Kelanic, *Black Gold*, 130-54.

exists to justify the direct basing of U.S. troops in the region, but the need for some U.S. engagement in the Gulf was not always purely mythical.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the book never fully resolves the most tantalizing puzzle it raises: *why* so many people get oil politics so wrong. Where does “oilcraft” come from, and why does it continue to hold such a firm grip on the public imagination – despite the debunking efforts of Vitalis and so many scholars who came before him? In numerous places, the author suggests that oilcraft grew out of racism, especially early twentieth-century ideas that supposedly irrational non-white peoples could not be trusted to manage natural resources that rightfully belonged to all of mankind (38-40, 42-43 45-46, 69, 74, 79). Racism is an important and plausible explanation, but Vitalis asserts it almost off-handedly, without making a strong argument or presenting much supporting evidence. That is surprising, not least because the literature on orientalism and U.S.-Mideast relations provides plenty of fodder to fill out the case.<sup>34</sup> In the author’s defense, answering the why question is not the main mission of the book, and it may be unfair to criticize an author for the book I *wished* he had written, as opposed to the book he actually wrote. However, Vitalis comes so frustratingly close to offering a good answer that it is a shame he did not develop his insights further.

In all, *Oilcraft* represents a valiant effort to correct some of the most repeated false claims about the role of oil in international affairs. Whether it will succeed in shifting, or at least unsettling, broader perceptions is difficult to predict. But the zombie-like refusal of these beliefs to die even though many are knowably – and *known* to be – false reflects the awesome power of discourses to sustain historical misinterpretations.

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<sup>33</sup> Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic, “Should the United States Stay in the Gulf?,” in *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the U.S. Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil* ed. Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 233-250; “Getting out of the Gulf,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:1 (2017), 122-131. For a dissenting view, Caitlin Talmadge, “The Future of U.S. Force Posture in the Gulf: The Case for a Residual Forward Presence,” in *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the U.S. Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil*, ed. Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 251-280.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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 REVIEW BY EMILY MEIERDING, NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL
 

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When I teach classes about energy security, there are always a few questions I hope that students don't ask. One is why the Carter administration was afraid that the Soviet Union would use its invasion of Afghanistan as a launching pad to take over Persian Gulf oil resources. Another is what, exactly, the United States and Saudi Arabia agreed to in their purported 'oil for security' deal in 1945. When I look for satisfying answers to these questions, I inevitably come up short.

Robert Vitalis's provocative new book, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy*, explains why I did not find straightforward answers to these questions: they weren't there. Instead, he argues, these "vivid truths" are part of "oilcraft": an "ideological construction, a set of deeply held, pervasive beliefs" that, while false, "makes notions of oil-as-power unquestionably true" (6). Oilcraft's constitutive beliefs include that oil is different from other raw materials, that controlling oil is a source of power, that the United States and its allies face a serious risk of deliberate oil supply shutoffs, and that countries go to war for oil resources. Vitalis claims that these convictions, which have characterized Americans' thinking about oil since the 1920s, have induced, reproduced, and legitimated irrational policies, including maintaining a U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, supposedly to secure access to oil flows. Vitalis's goals in *Oilcraft* are "to demonstrate how such seemingly unshakeable beliefs are nonetheless false" and show "what work these false beliefs about oil and geopolitics do today" (3, 21).

I am inherently sympathetic to Vitalis's agenda, having also highlighted the need to interrogate the myths that shape popular thinking about oil, both in order to understand the work that these myths are doing and to avoid flawed policy choices.<sup>35</sup> I laud *Oilcraft* for taking on these core convictions and for reminding readers that other critics have previously done the same. I also hope that Vitalis will be more successful than his predecessors in shifting Americans' thinking about oil—or at least, in raising their awareness of the possibly flawed assumptions that underpin U.S. foreign policy choices. That said, I find some of Vitalis's myth-busting unpersuasive and question whether illuminating oilcraft will produce policy change.

After chapter one presents *Oilcraft*'s concepts, agenda, and overall argument, chapters two and three walk readers through the history of oilcraft's development. Vitalis presents this belief system as an extension of earlier imperialist convictions that controlling raw materials was a source of power and that leaving them in other countries' hands presented a serious security threat (9, 12-13, 30-40). Events that subsequently reinforced this belief system include the oil scarcity fears that followed both world wars (27-29, 42-43); oil industry nationalizations, including Iran's in 1951 (46-48); and, most significantly, the U.S. energy crises in the 1970s (chapter 3). These chapters also observe that critics of oilcraft, including the "Columbia School" in the 1920s, strategist Bernard Brodie in the 1940s, and economist Morris Adelman in the 1970s (13-15, 17, 60-61), existed during each of these periods.<sup>36</sup> Vitalis's revival of these critical perspectives is one of the book's highlights.

Another of *Oilcraft*'s strengths is its illumination of the belief system's foundational drivers, in particular, fear, racism, and the preference of most people for simple explanations. Quoting William Culbertson, a faculty member of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and coordinator of prominent intellectual roundtables on national resource policy in the 1920s, Vitalis identifies "fear and suspicion" as "the fundamental forces determining the psychology of imperialism" (36).<sup>37</sup> In the case of oil, specific "bogey and phantoms" include the fear of running out, the fear of conflict with another

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<sup>35</sup> Emily Meierding, *The Oil Wars Myth: Petroleum and the Causes of International Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> Morris K. Adelman, *The Genie Out of the Bottle: World Oil Supply Since 1970* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Bernard Brodie, "Foreign Oil and American Security," Yale Institute of International Studies Memorandum no. 23, September 15, 1947.

<sup>37</sup> William S. Culbertson, "Problems of Raw Materials and Foodstuffs in the Commercial Politics of Nations," Special issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 12 (March 1924).

great power, and the fear of deliberate supply shutoffs by producer states. Vitalis persuasively argues that the last of these fears is linked to racism. He quotes numerous policy makers and public intellectuals who, over the last century, have claimed, in racially-charged terms, that developing countries are not reliable oil suppliers (38-40, 43-48, 52, 69-70, 79, 81). Last, Vitalis highlights the attraction of simple explanations. As he puts it, “Oil answers the need of those looking for real or material objectives behind the government’s rhetoric” and he quotes Columbia School theorist Parker Moon’s observation that “such material treasures are something the public can visualize, something the statesmen can understand” (7, 11, 36).<sup>38</sup>

Vitalis makes a compelling case that fear is a key driver of oilcraft. I was, however, unconvinced that this fear is as outlandish as he suggests, for two reasons. First, Vitalis’s argument that oil is not “different or unique or exceptional,” relative to other raw materials was unpersuasive (7, 126). Vitalis observes that people used to talk about other raw materials the way they now talk about oil (2). However, around 1975, other raw materials vanished from the conversation, shifting the focus exclusively to oil (54). I question this claim on empirical grounds, given the histrionics that have emerged around rare earth minerals over the last decade. Additionally, I am unconvinced that a focus on oil is odd or unreasonable. As Vitalis acknowledges, “the world pays some ten times more for [oil] annually than it does for gold, iron, and copper, the next three most valuable raw material exports” (20). Oil has also been exceptionally important in wartime, with inadequate resource access contributing to the defeats of some countries.<sup>39</sup> Finally, oil is unique, in terms of the amount of trauma it has inflicted on the American psyche. All of these factors suggest that oil is quantitatively, if not qualitatively, distinct from other raw materials. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that the prospect of losing access to oil produces an intense fear response.

Second, Vitalis dismisses these fears by reiterating the reasonable observation of earlier critics that all oil producers have incentives to sell their resources.<sup>40</sup> This fairly crude (pun intended) assertion overlooks the fact that producers *have* sometimes refused to sell their resources; the United States and its allies withholding oil from Japan and Germany during World War II is a particularly vivid instance. In addition, producers’ oil exports may decline, thereby reducing global oil supplies for unintended reasons, like internal instability or botched nationalizations. Finally, Americans did confront oil shortages, twice, in the 1970s. Vitalis castigates “blogs, textbooks, and even professional histories” that present the 1973–74 energy crisis “as a ‘watershed’ or ‘transformative’ moment” (81). Yet, he also describes the crisis as “trauma inducing” and concedes that “A certain degree of overreaction or threat inflation is understandable among those who lived through the price rises, gas lines, and bluster of those first months” (68-69). Given this history and oil’s economic and strategic importance, is oilcraft’s sway on Americans’ thinking unreasonable? Do its believers merit the scathing treatment that they receive in most of *Oilcraft*? Put more bluntly, is everyone who fears losing access to oil a fool, racist, or both?

Vitalis is on stronger ground when he critiques the policies that the United States has adopted, purportedly to secure oil access. In chapters four and five, he makes a compelling argument that maintaining a U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and a close relationship with Saudi Arabia have not enhanced the access to oil of the United States or its allies. This conclusion left me with another question: Can exposing oilcraft and the irrationality of the practices it inspires actually provoke policy change?

My question arises partly from the book’s depiction of oilcraft’s drivers. As noted above, Vitalis often presents oilcraft as an essentially inadvertent product of fear, racism, and people’s preferences for simple, tangible explanations. However, he also periodically identifies actors who deliberately promote oilcraft in order to advance their parochial goals. For example, American oil companies highlighted threats to their Middle Eastern operations in order to cultivate U.S. government

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<sup>38</sup> Parker T. Moon, *Imperialism and World Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 545.

<sup>39</sup> Rose Kelanic, *Black Gold and Blackmail: Oil and Great Power Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Anand Toprani, *Oil and the Great Powers: Britain and Germany, 1914 to 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> For example, Allan Pulsifer, “Watershed, Aberration, and Hallucination: The Last Twenty Years,” in *Energy Crisis*, David Lewis Feldman, ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

support (35-36, 83-84). In the late 1970s, Samuel Huntington hyped the purported Soviet threat to Persian Gulf oil resources in order “to create a document that would scare the Carter administration into greater respect for the Soviet menace” (77). Today, Vitalis claims, energy security experts reproduce oilcraft to give themselves something to do, politicians embrace it to cover up their real motives, and beneficiaries of the U.S.-Saudi relationship promote it to sustain close bilateral ties (27, 55, 116, 127, 130). If these actors are in the driver’s seat, then simply revealing that the “seemingly unshakeable beliefs” that constitute oilcraft “are nonetheless false” is unlikely to elicit policy change (3).

In addition, even if readers are persuaded by Vitalis’s claim that the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and relationship with Saudi Arabia are unnecessary to protect access to oil *resources*, this does not mean that the United States will leave the region.<sup>41</sup> It may stay for other oil-related reasons: specifically, to prevent oil rents from going to threatening states or to sustain the petrodollar system (16, 74, 89-90, 116, 130). Alternatively, the United States may stay for other, non-oil reasons, which Vitalis repeatedly implies could be the actual drivers of U.S. policy (41-42, 79). This raises a final, larger question: are the United States’ activities in the Persian Gulf undertaken “for oil”? *Oilcraft* seems to want to challenge this claim; it critiques, for example, the belief that countries go to war for oil (5, 7, 25). Yet, Vitalis also asserts that many American policy makers and public intellectuals are true believers; they ascribe to, and act on the basis of, oilcraft (9, 12, 79, 122-23). If the latter claim is accurate, then isn’t oil access more than a “rationalization and not really the central issue” (42)? Here, *Oilcraft* paints itself into a corner. Either policymakers are, in fact, fighting for oil, or they are fighting for other reasons and not in oilcraft’s thrall. This conundrum, like the question of whether oilcraft is primarily deliberate or inadvertent, is left unresolved.

Like most polemics—and, ironically, like oilcraft’s adherents—*Oilcraft* overstates and does not fully support some of its claims. However, my critiques and questions notwithstanding, I thoroughly enjoyed the book and appreciate Vitalis’s continued dedication to subjecting accepted truths to appropriate levels of critical scrutiny.<sup>42</sup> I hope *Oilcraft* will inspire more people to do the same.

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<sup>41</sup> For other explorations of this topic, see Emma Ashford, “Unbalanced: Rethinking America’s Commitment to the Middle East,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12:1 (2018): 127-48; Sarah A. Emerson and Andrew C. Winner, “The Myth of Petroleum Independence and Foreign Policy Isolation,” *The Washington Quarterly* 37:1 (2014): 21-34; Eugene Gholz and Daryl G. Press, “Protecting ‘The Prize’: Oil and the US National Interest,” *Security Studies* 19:3 (2010): 453-485; Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary Kelanic, eds. *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2016); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil,” *Security Studies* 233 (2014): 548-581; Doug Stokes and Sam Raphael, *Global Energy Security and American Hegemony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).



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 RESPONSE BY ROBERT VITALIS, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
 

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I am grateful to Jeffrey G. Karam for organizing this spirited H-Diplo roundtable on my new book. *Oilcraft* exposes the factitious nature of many conventional beliefs about the United States and the “global struggle,” as some imagine it, that “has always surrounded oil.”<sup>43</sup> My reviewers are three scholars whose work I have read, taught, and admire. Rosie Bsheer is a historian of modern Saudi Arabia and a comrade who provided me a key document when I was writing my chapter on the mythical origins and nature of the US-Saudi “special” relationship. She summarizes the book’s purpose and arguments better than I ever could. Although I have not drawn attention to the fact until now, the book is a highly personal journey through my past as a leftist scholar of Middle Eastern political economy. I found myself increasingly out of step with other tenured radicals, public intellectuals, and anti-imperialist activists who take for granted that the United States exercises “control” of the oil resources there, seemingly, from the 1940s until today. The book argues that these false beliefs bedevil efforts to rethink and reverse the militarization of U.S. foreign policy.

The two other reviewers, Rosemary Kelanic and Emily Meierding, are political scientists who teach international relations and U.S. national security affairs. Both have recently published important books that confirm many of my arguments. After rejecting a lot of wooly-thinking on the topic, they still defend the idea that oil, as a strategic good, is different from all those other humdrum commodities traded on world markets, a view I dispute. Thus, we would expect some pushback. Their objections though—aside from the wish that *Oilcraft* looked more like the kind of book that professors produce in pursuit of tenure or influence in Washington—are answered by returning to the one I did write.

Following the oil price revolution in 1973-1974, events that turned erstwhile “isolationist” International Relations scholars such as Robert Tucker and Kenneth Waltz into gung-ho interventionists, U.S. administrations from Jimmy Carter’s on pursued a policy of increasing militarization of the Persian Gulf in defense of the so-called free flow of oil.<sup>44</sup> The funny thing is that for the first few of those post “oil crisis” years the Pentagon’s views of major threats facing the United States remained unaffected by all the stress about growing U.S. energy independence and the pernicious influence of OPEC.<sup>45</sup> It is the fall of the U.S. ally the Shah of Iran in January and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 that concentrated the official mind on the alleged threats that instability in the Gulf posed, as never before, to national security, resulting in the beginning of the great pivot of U.S. military power projection from Southeast to Southwest Asia.<sup>46</sup>

*Oilcraft* wrestles with the reasoning found in the vast archive of books, articles, newspaper stories, speeches, Congressional testimonies, declassified documents, lectures, and antiwar talks that have followed—either to legitimate, defend or condemn the militarization of the Persian Gulf on the grounds that it is the means by which, *somehow*, “the world economy benefits or that the government enhances the security of its citizens or that a capitalist class preserves its dominance over the globe” (3). It is in working through the evidence in alleged support of such claims, that is, when one can even find evidence, that

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 3 and front jacket flap of the first edition.

<sup>44</sup> Both Tucker and Walt went from arguing that dependency fears were irrational to defending the logic of intervention. See Vitalis, 75, and for examples of their re-positioning, Robert Tucker, “Oil: The Issue of American Intervention,” *Commentary* (January 1975), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/tucker-robert-w/oil-the-issue-of-american-intervention/> and Kenneth Waltz, “A Strategy for the Rapid Deployment Force,” *International Security* 5, 4 (1981), 49-73.

<sup>45</sup> See Andrew Bacevich, *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 10.

<sup>46</sup> “From the end of World War II to 1980, virtually no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in the region... Since 1990, virtually no American soldiers have been killed in action anywhere *except* in the Greater Middle East.” *Ibid.*

underscored for me the extent to which these beliefs occupy “a middle ground between science and superstition, an invisible realm of collective understandings, a half-lit zone in the mind’s eye.”<sup>47</sup>

Bsheer points to a perfect example: The now taken-for-granted belief that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and King Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (Ibn Saud) concluded an agreement or alliance aboard the USS Quincy in February 1945 that traded “oil for security.” The best of my undergraduates can produce this key “fact” without prompting. *New York Times* foreign affairs guru Tom Friedman derides it as “a deal” rather than a true “special relationship” of the kind the United States enjoys with Great Britain (85). Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’s top foreign policy advisor, Matt Duss, wonders if the 1945 “bargain...still holds.”<sup>48</sup> Phyllis Bennis, the in-house Middle East expert at the legacy left-wing think tank, the Institute for Policy Studies, reproduces the actual conversation between the king and Roosevelt when rallying anti-Saudi activists to the cause, which is near miraculous, given that no documentary evidence for the deal exists (92). Far from guaranteeing their security and “arming the Saudis,” Roosevelt and his successor Harry Truman refused all entreaties by the king to sell him U.S. weapons and sign a treaty of alliance.<sup>49</sup> Great Britain, not the United States, trained and armed the Saudi military through the 1940s. And the export of Saudi oil to the West was guaranteed by a concession awarded to U.S. oil firms in the 1930s, back when the U.S. minister in Cairo, one thousand miles away, served to represent the New Deal administration’s interests in the Arabian Peninsula.

Almost as miraculous, no study of U.S.-Saudi relations from 1954’s *Arabian Peninsula*, by the then-top ranking Arabian affairs officer William Sanger, to the overstuffed shelves of books that followed in the wake the 1973 oil crisis and deepen financial and military ties of the 1980s and 1990s says any such thing.<sup>50</sup> The meme, with its clichéd photo of the two ailing leaders and the missionary’s son and later undercover CIA operative Bill Eddy, who served as translator, kneeling between them, is a post-9/11 invention. It has taken its place together with older, no less factitious beliefs, for one, about oil as the prize and as a main driver of conflict across the whole of the twentieth century. The work of Meierding and Kelanic is part of that of the second generation of international relations theorists telling this story, and in fact does so better than most.<sup>51</sup>

The problem is, the founders of the fields of international relations, national security studies, and geopolitics in the United States, who wrote in the first part of the twentieth century, believed no such thing. There was a “hierarchy of raw materials,” they insisted, and oil was by no means the most important either to international economic relations or to the course of the two world wars. As the man who arguably did most to make geopolitics respectable in the United States put it, coal was more important than oil, while “it is an axiom, none the less true for being perfectly obvious that without steel and iron neither the prosecution of large-scale warfare nor the maintenance of a vast heavy industrial production is possible.”<sup>52</sup> Japanese civilian planners in the run-up to the Pacific war argued the same (26-27), while the economist Herbert Feis, a wartime advisor to the Pentagon, wrote that it was the shortage of rubber “that presented the greatest threat to the safety of

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<sup>47</sup> Quoting the book that inspired my own, by Barbara and Karen Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 23.

<sup>48</sup> Uri Friedman and Yara Bayoumy, “The U.S.-Saudi Alliance Is On the Brink,” *The Atlantic* (July 1, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/trump-blocking-big-change-us-saudi-alliance/592504/>.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Klare is only one of many analysts who imagined that the United States agreed to arm the Al Saud in 1945, Vitalis, 91-92.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Sanger, *The Arabian Peninsula* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954).

<sup>51</sup> See Meierding’s review, fn. 7, for some of the leading studies.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, *The Balance of Tomorrow: Power and Foreign Policy in the United States* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1945), 120.

our nation and the success of the Allies cause” (20). The Korean War triggered price rises that, reliably if wrongly, led to fears that the United States was in danger of running out of all kinds of raw materials that were vital to the nation’s defense. The handwringing, task forces, commissions, and policy changes are all but forgotten now. With the trauma of the oil price revolution came the convention, unselfconscious for sure, of writing history backwards, as if oil was always *the* resource that mattered, with revisionist powers and Middle Eastern megalomaniacs lining up to command the choke points, well heads, and palaces of imagined friends like the Al Saud.

Were those who, say, believed that the Soviet Union threatened to take over the oil in the Persian Gulf and then somehow—it is never explained how—hijack prices or cut off the West or end U.S. hegemony over Europe and Japan rational? Yes, in precisely the same way that the prize-winning, highly lauded scholars who in the 1920s through the 1970s believed in and advanced theories of black inferiority, which provided the scaffolding for imperial adventures abroad and anti-miscegenation statutes, disfranchisement, and domination at home were rational. Where some examine the archival record and deem the Soviet threat credible, through “a close reading of the case,” as Meierding puts it, I see evidence of operating in the fields’ half-lit zone or, more prosaically, of a failure to “query assumptions, the nature of available evidence, or the coherence of their reasoning from that evidence.”<sup>53</sup>

Kelanic says I go too far, and offers China as an example of a country’s strategists rationally fearing the loss of oil supply in the event of war with the United States. But I discuss the very same case (17). What I show is that militarization of the Persian Gulf itself has no bearing on the course that a highly unlikely conflict with China over Taiwan will take since it is not “control” at the mine or wellhead that has ever mattered to supply problems at times of protracted, great power conflict, when normal market operations are disrupted. Meanwhile, Chinese officials do what every other country does to reduce vulnerability to supply disruptions, by hedging, diversifying, and stockpiling, oil and many other minerals and other resources.<sup>54</sup>

This reading of history backwards underpins my critics’ basic objections. The putative lessons of the last world war and the prospect of one with the Soviets have seemingly been lost on me. States have good reason to worry about access at such moments, rare as they might be. Sure. Save the militarization of the Gulf really took off only as the highly fantastical Soviet “threat” receded (77-81). Over the same period, from the mid-1970s to now in fact, a vast record of public pronouncements by the country’s leaders describing the threats to “the continuous flow of oil from the Persian Gulf” exists that, we agree, make little sense. Are leaders and other top officials keeping the ‘we-are-there-in-case-as-unlikely-as-it-might-be-of-protracted-great-power-conflict’ rationale to themselves? No declassified records exist of such calculations making their way up the chain of civilian command, and no journalist has yet to uncover evidence of this kind in their accounts of militarizing the Middle East. ‘Theory’ in this and many other instances sits squarely in that middle ground between science and superstition.

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<sup>53</sup> Fields, *Racecraft*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> As I note, coal rather than oil provides the largest share of China’s energy needs. Its Belt and Road Initiative is a policy to diversify trade routes for goods in general rather than for oil and gas resources in particular. Vitalis, 143, fn 50.