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Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy

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United States” (p. 23). Herein lies an admonition for the policy makers and national-security professionals who should read *The American Way of Empire*: too often America sets forth to change the world, without realizing that just as often the world changes it.

JEFFREY P. ROGG



Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy, by Robert Vitalis. Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2020. 224 pages. \$24.

Energy analysts often gripe that everyone who drives a car or owns a lightbulb thinks this provides sufficient training to claim expertise in energy markets. In his new book, contrarian University of Pennsylvania political scientist Robert Vitalis takes to task mainstream experts who equate oil with power. At times breezily polemical, this concise but richly researched foray is a valuable contribution to the prolific “geopolitics of energy” literature in fashion today.

The incisive commentary begins with the title: the word *oilcraft* is a play on *witchcraft*, not *statecraft* or *tradedcraft*; it is explicitly pejorative, not complimentary. Laying his cynical cards on the table from the outset, Vitalis is unrelenting in his critique of the “modern-day form of magical realism” (p. 6) that presumes that oil is the “lifeblood or weapon or prize” (p. 23), constituting an axiomatic truth that consequently requires a special relationship with Persian Gulf nations, military commitments around the world, and strategic deal making with unsavory regimes. He derides as a pernicious myth the “need once to control and now secure access, stabilize prices,

or prevent hostile powers from holding the world economy hostage” (p. 122). Vitalis names names and spares none, reserving his most incendiary ammunition not for policy makers, as one might expect, but for his fellow academics.

The analytical core of the book comprises detailed surveys of energy-security discussions in the 1920s and 1970s. In the earlier period, policy makers panicked about Britain’s expansive control of global oil supplies, which prompted the rise, within the burgeoning field of international relations, of the so-called Columbia School, which dismissed great-power competition as an unnecessary and counterproductive geopolitical framework for consideration. The lessons of these debates, Vitalis argues, were long forgotten by the time resource scarcity again seized the nation’s consciousness. This later period, beginning around 1973, is broadly misunderstood. For instance, it was a group of Arab countries that imposed the infamous oil embargo, not the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries; the upward pressure on oil prices—driven by a complex host of reasons, including turbulent international financial conditions—predated the Yom Kippur War, and therefore was not caused by it, as is sometimes portrayed. One of the most interesting points Vitalis makes is that the resulting higher oil prices fueled greater development of oil resources in the United States (e.g., in Alaska and the offshore Gulf of Mexico).

Other episodes make brief cameos, recast in a petroleum-tinted light: the so-called Tanker War between Iran and Iraq, Operations DESERT STORM and IRAQI FREEDOM, the development of the Carter Doctrine, the deployment of U.S. Marines to Lebanon, and the slew of

terrorist attacks that came to characterize the American presence in the region.

This historical analysis builds up to the political climax of the book. Echoing his previous work on American foreign policy in the Middle East, Vitalis gleefully dismantles the widely accepted assertion that the Roosevelt administration and the Saudi royal family agreed to a nebulous “oil for security” deal during World War II. According to folklore—which Vitalis skewers—the United States, ever since those bygone days, has protected the kingdom (including with deadly force) in an explicit exchange for petroleum access. Instead, Vitalis argues that oil markets would function just fine regardless of who holds the keys to Abqaiq, Ras Tanura, and the rest of the Saudi kingdom’s oil bounty. He asserts that energy-security concerns are employed misleadingly to justify the perpetuation of this polarizing alliance, about the merits of which he is deeply skeptical. The author writes with admiration for the similarly skeptical scholars of the 1920s and 1970s who challenged the conventional wisdom about energy security as the basis for foreign-policy decisions (particularly in terms of military intervention).

Robert Vitalis makes bold and clear claims. One wonders whether a mere 134 pages of text (before the acknowledgments and endnotes) are enough to marshal the necessary evidence and argumentation. He succeeds in building his case, but the reader is left wanting a bit more. The book also is peppered with an unfortunate and thoroughly unnecessary number of typographical errors that detract from the cutting prose and punchy critiques of the existing literature.

Although mentioned only in passing, the twenty-first-century growth in domestic U.S. oil production and America’s rise to prominence as a significant exporter of petroleum already are prompting a reevaluation of long-standing national-security policy. Whether this reevaluation necessarily entails a reduction in, realignment of, or reckoning with respect to the nation’s presence overseas is a contentious proposition. Even asking the question is enough to raise hackles in Washington, where bureaucratic inertia enables the circling of wagons with impressive speed. The case studies that Vitalis presents remind us that these debates are not new. Readers may not agree with all his conclusions—and certainly not with every sarcastic remark he directs toward other scholars—but the argument is challenging, brisk, and unwavering. It warrants close examination by regional specialists and global strategists alike, and, perhaps, a full-fledged rebuttal from the alleged sorcerers of oilcraft.

TRISTAN ABBEY



A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy, by James R. Holmes. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019. 200 pages. \$24.95.

Naval training, by necessity, is anchored in developing technical and tactical expertise quickly. All newly minted officers preparing to serve on, above, or below the surface of the ocean are assimilating how-to skills. Demands on their time do not diminish in their first operational command, where training continues and expectations increase. In this busy and technology-heavy environment, there often is little time