

# Shifting Sands and the Unreason of State: Review of *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt US Energy Policy* by Robert Vitalis

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**Abstract:** At a time of intensifying global conflict and corresponding reconfiguration of supply chains in line with national security prerogatives, the contradictions inherent in the “rules-based order” supported by and supporting US global hegemony are becoming ever more apparent and unsustainable. Robert Vitalis’s study of US–Saudi relations within the wider context of US energy policy reveals the extent to which myths intended to legitimize and enable imperialist policies have outgrown their original purpose and now threaten to destabilize the very conditions they were and remain intended to support. The inability of US political elites to recognize a reality that includes relative decline globally and socioeconomic fragility domestically, undermining efforts to sustain its outsized military presence worldwide and the appropriation of resources required to service that, are at increasing risk of triggering global catastrophe in the form of nuclear-armed warfare.

**Key words:** Ideology; hegemony; imperialism; energy; foreign policy

**Submission date:** 10 August 2023; **Revised date:** 10 October 2023; **Acceptance date:** 19 October 2023; **Publication date:** 15 April 2024

*Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt US Energy Policy*, by Robert Vitalis. Stanford University Press, 2020, 240pp, \$24.00 (Hardback), ISBN 978-1-5036-0090-4, \$22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5036-3259-2

When and how do myths capture the minds of those tasked daily with the responsibility of exercising real power? It is customary to attribute the use of myth as a means of “hoodwinking the people,” as warned against by Benedict de Spinoza in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* ([1670] 2021) with respect to religious authority. However, the implicit assumption of news management and cynical spin-doctoring in the service of ulterior motives ignores what the book under review here reveals to be a more complex problem of ruling class subscription to and even delusion by myth. This renders any attempt at a reality check more difficult, not least due to its legitimization of policy, but also because of myth’s incorporation into a shared ontology buttressed by authoritative repetition and affirmation. This problem is hardly new, nor unique to the United States, and there are more glaring and egregious examples of this phenomenon than that featured in *Oilcraft* (Vitalis 2020). However, in addition to this book’s forensic excavation of evidence, recent events subsequent to its publication are a vindication of both its author’s choice of subject and his analysis of ideology’s role in justifying an increasingly dangerous foreign policy that creates insecurity, even to the point of threatening devastating global conflict.

## The Social Misconstruction of Reality

Following the work of Louis Althusser, ideology is grounded in social practices (e.g., Hall 1985, 98; Joseph 2002, 119). Analogous to capital, whose tethering to place and time is both a source of and a constraint on its power, ideologies (defined as workably consistent systems of thought, however loosely systematized and ultimately contradictory they might be in practice), must, to be efficacious, be seen to be tethered (however tenuously) to the realities they purport to represent. This does not require ideology to possess any of the requirements of scientific validity. Rather, it is sufficient that it provides a readily accessible and widely accepted explanation and/or justification. The greater its apparent verisimilitude, the stronger its reinforcement and reproduction of practice, and thereby the conventional wisdom. In this Althusser drew from Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “organic ideologies” that are “necessary to a given structure,” as opposed to those “that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or ‘willed.’” Organic ideologies “‘organise’ human masses, and create the terrain on which men move” (Gramsci 1971, 376–377).

Ideologies can also have a performative effect—that is to say, they “create” the reality they supposedly explain (Austin 1962). In recent years, this aspect has been featured prominently in Donald MacKenzie’s analysis of financial markets and

the behavior of their participant actors, for example (MacKenzie 2006). Somewhat relatedly, Althusser's concept of interpellation was intended to convey the manner in which the human subject is constituted by ideology, "conceived as a material instance of practices and rituals" (Larrain 1996, 47). Thus, to be a corporate executive is to engage in certain practices expected of corporate executives, just as government ministers are supposed to be statesmanlike and conduct themselves in a manner commensurate with the status of office, with respect to both style and substance. Once again, Gramsci earlier observed that organic, "necessary" ideologies, in making the terrain upon which humans act, allows them to "acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc." (Gramsci 1971, 377).

Among other applications, this has particular relevance for understanding apparently irrational behavior by state leaders. The illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the United States, was denounced as "unnecessary" and "irrational" by, among others, conservative and realist commentators (Mearsheimer and Walt 2003; Jackson and Kaufman 2007; Karkour 2018) and provoked widespread international condemnation, even before it was launched. Yet it happened anyway, despite not only unprecedented levels of global protest (Hands 2006), but also its blatant recklessness (Bahdi 2002). According to Ahsan Butt, this decision can be attributed to a desire within the George W. Bush administration and beyond for a "performative war," in which whatever great power status was lost in the 9/11 attacks of 2001 would be restored by victory against "a recalcitrant foe" (Butt 2019, 251). Such a demonstration effect was already the intention behind the Reagan administration's authorization of the invasion of Grenada in 1983. Among other objectives, for the US it was chiefly intended to exorcise the ghost of defeat in Vietnam by "demonstrat[ing] to the world that it was capable and willing to use the mobile military strike forces in which it has invested so much" (Kenworthy 1984, 635).

Since that time, US foreign policy following the end of the Cold War has been driven by forces depicted as "systematically dysfunctional [and doing] significant damage to itself and its national security . . . for reasons that have as much or more to do with domestic politics than international imperatives" (Wirls 2010, 7; Johnson 2000). Despite the notoriety of the process leading to the invasion of Iraq, the fabrication of "intelligence" to support an already-selected policy has become the norm (McGovern 2006; Goodman 2017). Inconvenient realities are now routinely removed from intelligence analysis in order to serve immediate political goals (Bakken 2020). Karkour (2018, 62) cites Hans Morgenthau's distinction between "essential," "desirable," and "possible" interests to the effect that desire seems to have outrun any concept of possible, let alone essential. He reminds us also of Morgenthau's opposition to the Vietnam War and his development of the concept of a "coherent system of irrationality" that could explain, from a realist

position, the confusion of “vital and desirable interests in a manner that ultimately renders excessive violence . . . the end of a policy that serves the policymakers’ egos and offers them the illusion of mastery of reality” (Karkour 2021, 534).

Marxists have also struggled with the apparent irrationality of 21st-century US policy, whose repeatedly self-defeating nature defies simple reduction to standard analyses of imperialism and crises of accumulation, although these remain foundational to a proper understanding of the processes by which such outcomes have resulted. In this context Jeff Noonan has argued for a reappraisal of the relative autonomy of the political sphere in international relations, intended as a means for enabling a better understanding of the rationalities and ideologies that structure the reality and therefore the practices of state decision-makers in the short term. This does not require abandonment or rejection of the fundamental long-term structural tendencies of global accumulation as ultimately determining the trajectory of development, but it does facilitate a stronger grasp of “the immediate, day-to-day terms of diplomacy of diplomacy and political interaction” (Noonan 2023, 2). As with Maurice Cowling’s focus on “high politics” in his study of the rise of the British Labour Party and his consequent exclusion of the social forces driving this rise, outright dismissal of such methodological choices would deny access to significant empirical evidence and perspective, including that which reveals the mindset and worldviews of the “fifty or sixty politicians in conscious tension with one another whose accepted authority constituted political leadership” (Cowling 1971, 3–4). Such insights are crucial to a better understanding of the machinations in the corridors and cabinet rooms of power, especially as today we have a much more developed understanding of ideology, interpellation, and performativity. Such approaches as “high politics” can also explain the reasons for the ultimate success or failure of any particular decision or interest more generally, contrasting the immediate situational logic employed by individual actors with the underlying dynamics of change. This reduces the risk of assuming a default rationality among state actors. It is also consistent with historical materialism, the dialectical method of Marx, whereby the fundamental role of class struggle as the driving force of history can nevertheless, within a specific historical moment, be subjected to the “decisive role and power of a key person, leader or group” (Cheng and Liu 2017, 306). Antonini (2021, 3–7) points out that Marx’s account of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* demonstrates exactly this point, also applied by Engels in *Violence and Economics in the Formation of the New German Empire* regarding the role played by Otto von Bismarck.

Of course, there is no hermetic seal between the institutions of the state and wider society. For this very reason, state actors (politicians, civil servants, senior military personnel, diplomats, among others) are often recruited from institutions intended to mold future generations of such individuals. Via such means, a

“common sense” is perpetuated such that practices and beliefs are reproduced, subject to adaptation required by changing conditions. The “common sense” is an amalgam of variegated influences whose composition and relative weighting depend on the socialization and enculturation of the individuals and groups by which it is practiced and through which it evolves. Those in positions of power will, by definition, be governed by a different composite of influences than the sub-altern, for example, but a key task of any state ideology is to bind the ruled to the rulers. To the extent that this is successful, the state ideology provides the basis of a division of labor between different classes and fractions thereof, all together reproducing the state form in its various manifestations, following Antonio Gramsci’s definition of the state as political society and civil society (Jessop 2020, 1). Equally, following Gramsci’s work on hegemony, the rulers must ultimately serve the interests of the dominant fraction of capital or hegemonic bloc of class fractions if they are to remain in place. Where such alignment between class hegemony, the state form, and accumulation strategy fails to materialize, as many argue is the case with the United States in recent years, decline is the result, accompanied (and possibly triggered) by intra-elite rivalry and plunder (Bina 2022; Lachmann 2020; see also Martyanov 2021 for a conservative perspective).

In his analysis of US imperial decline, Richard Lachmann is careful not to ascribe to state personnel any sort of default rationality or foresight. Instead, the rivalry between capital fractions is shown to be responsible for policies that, in favoring one set over another, can ultimately lead to more fundamental problems that threaten the stability of the edifice that is the state. The financialization of the US economy and hollowing out of manufacturing is now widely acknowledged to have created the conditions that are undermining that stability. Concurrently, as decline gathers pace, the intensity with which adherence to a particular legitimating ideology increases, ultimately blinding its adherents to the reality they must somehow navigate. Thus, during this century, US politicians and corporate executives

failed to foresee the dynamism of . . . competitors, in part because the neoliberal ideology of their managers couldn’t comprehend the Chinese state’s capacity to foster innovation, extend credit, and to help both state-owned and private firms capture foreign markets. (Lachmann 2023, 183)

Such blindness is not new: an earlier generation proved equally oblivious to the reasons behind the economic rise of Japan (Johnson 1982).

Nationalist arrogance and racism can enable easy dismissal of real threats because the source of these is regarded as too lacking in the necessary sophistication, but with the tailoring of expertise to fit preconceived agendas, whether it is economists constructing models that “show” the inferiority of non-market

arrangements or intelligence analysts failing to tell truth to power for fear of losing their jobs, there comes a point at which the institutionalization of such tailoring creates an environment in which subsequent office-holders know no better and merely produce what is demanded of them today, with no thought of the longer term consequences. The disconnection from reality thus takes root, grows, and is eventually reproduced automatically, placing leaders at an increasing disadvantage, whatever their tolerance of cognitive dissonance. Common sense becomes shared delusion, until an inevitable rude awakening.

## The Ideology of Oil and US Foreign Policy

One of the most pervasive and durable ideologies concerns the scientifically discredited claim regarding the existence of “race.” Racism is the application of such a belief, resulting in practices of invidious distinction and rank ordering of groups based on this belief. In their book *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* Karen Fields and Barbara Fields explain the persistence of racist ideology as grounded in everyday experience: “daily life produces an immense accumulation of supporting evidence for the belief” (Fields and Fields 2012, 24). Compared to witchcraft, which “once appeared real to very smart people” (Vitalis 2020, 121), and for which today “Americans acquire in childhood all it takes to doubt stories” of its actuality, “little in our childhood leads us to doubt race-craft” (Fields and Fields 2012, 24). This observation could equally apply to people of color routinely subject to police harassment, ghettoized urban living, and other forms of invidious distinction structurally embedded in European societies and cultures. Yet the structural embeddedness of racism remains most acute in the United States: “no identity has mattered more than race in determining and justifying hierarchy” (Vitalis 2007, xiv).

For Robert Vitalis, Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, this perspective on the everyday practices of racism supporting and supported by a pervasive and durable set of myths long ago debunked by science provided the help he needed to explain the near monolithic adherence to a set of “explanations” surrounding the geopolitics of US energy policy for over a century. Hence *Oilcraft*, so entitled to highlight “a modern-day form of magical realism on the part of many, diplomats included, about a commodity bought and sold on the New York Mercantile Exchange and elsewhere,” and grounded in “what the environmental engineer turned historian Roger Stern calls ‘oil scarcity ideology’” (Vitalis 2020, 6; Stern 2016).

The origins of “oilcraft” pre-date World War I. Beginning in 1908, scientists in the US Department of the Interior projected “peak oil” production, anticipating imminent decline “with total exhaustion to follow by the 1930s” (Stern 2020, 1).

This was part of a more general anxiety over the depletion of valuable resources (especially iron ore and coal, in addition to oil) that led President Theodore Roosevelt to convene a “Conference of Governors” in 1908, in which the national security implications of resource use and conservation were front and center (Stern 2020, 2). Thus began a hardy perennial of the US national security state, whose concern with preservation of domestic sources very quickly mushroomed into concern over access to foreign supplies. Stern (2020, 3–4) reminds us that in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, pushed for US military intervention in Mexico, justifying the occupation of Veracruz on the pretext of securing the surrounding oil-producing area (Eisenhower 1993).

As Stern notes, all this and more was done in the context of a hegemonic ideology of progressivism, which was so prevailing that all three leading presidential candidates in 1912 were self-proclaimed progressives. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers has highlighted the somewhat diffuse and incoherent nature of this ideology, whose simultaneous incorporation of anti-monopolism, social engineering, and organizational efficiency coincided with accelerating industrialization and urbanization, social justice campaigns, and the growth of the state (Rodgers 1982). Also acknowledged by Stern (2020, 139) is the inclusion within progressivism of white supremacy as both belief and political objective, particularly among its Southern exponents, not least the segregationist Wilson. This informed its framing of the resource scarcity “problem” as a national security issue, with lasting consequences.

Progressivism’s fusion of policy, public administration, and science, boosted by entry into World War I in 1917, saw an expansion of federal government capacity combined with its increasingly authoritarian and overtly political implementation, as with the notorious “Palmer raids” that employed the expanded federal security apparatus against radicals and immigrants during the “Red scare” of 1919–1921. The raids were named after A. Mitchell Palmer who, prior to being appointed Attorney General by Wilson in 1919, served as the Alien Property Custodian (APC). In this position Mitchell oversaw the plundering of German assets, including those that transformed the fortunes of the US chemicals industry. Originally taken under legal custodianship for the duration of the war, these assets were subject to a legislative amendment passed one week before the Armistice of November 1918, enabling their permanent confiscation and sale “at a pittance of their reputed value” to the non-profit Chemical Foundation, headed by none other than A. Mitchell Palmer (Hanieh 2021, 30). Thereafter non-exclusive licenses were issued to US-owned firms, nominally in accordance with the progressive movement’s anti-trust philosophy (Stern 2020, 1), although in fact the main beneficiaries were Dow Chemical, Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, Monsanto, and Du Pont, the latter of which had advised Mitchell on which patents to appropriate (Hanieh 2021, 31).

The US chemicals industry's good fortune was also fuel for the intensification of resource scarcity ideology, given the centrality of oil to the development and production of chemicals and plastics. A parallel discourse involving threats to national security posed by shortages of vital resources fed, and was fed by, post-World War I inter-imperialist rivalry over control of and access to these, with particular anxiety directed at British monopolization of oil and rubber (Vitalis 2020, 26–28). It is at this point in the story that Vitalis begins his project of excavating the various, largely forgotten or ignored, contributions of experts determined to debunk what they saw as a set of imaginary “bogeys” that justified aggressive, imperialistic adventurism, underwritten by racist ideology, and very much in the mold of the Wilson/Bryan-orchestrated occupation of Veracruz in 1914. This is not to suggest that the opponents of such adventurism were free of racism. For most, their quarrel was with the means of achieving economic security, as opposed to the ends and the underlying assumptions informing these.

The first significant challenge to the increasingly conventional wisdom as predicated on the basis of imaginary or inflated threats came from Edward Mead Earle in 1924. Described by Vitalis (2020, 26) as “one of the original and sharpest of oilcraft’s debunkers,” Earle, later famous as a founder of security studies (Ekbladh 2012), formed what Vitalis calls the “Columbia School” of history, which “emerged in the 1920s as the epicenter of the scholarly study of imperialism in (and by) the United States” (Vitalis 2020, 33). In this endeavor they were joined by William S. Culbertson, President of the US Tariff Commission from 1922–1925, whose treatment of imperialism was clear-eyed and unflinching, if also unapologetic with respect to the US “Open Door” variety. This “realism” Vitalis attributes to the strong influence of John A. Hobson (“from whom Vladimir Lenin borrowed a great deal”) among liberal scholars in the United States (Vitalis 2020, 148; Culbertson 1925). Hobson had argued persuasively (for a broad swathe of opinion ranging from Marxist to free-trade liberal) that the economic benefits of colonial possession were vastly overrated, given overwhelming statistical evidence that rather than the flag, “trade followed the price list” (Koebner and Schmidt 1964, 221). Not only that, but the exchange of goods was conducted predominantly and increasingly between Britain and rival industrial states, rather than within the Empire. Meanwhile underconsumption at home led the taxpayer to finance the military conquest, economic reorganization, and imposition of goods upon colonial markets that the domestic working class was unable to buy due to a paltry labor share of the surplus. Thereby was an economically dysfunctional inequality entrenched, to the benefit of imperialists and their financiers.

However, Hobson’s withering dismissal of the hypocritical and self-deceiving “civilizing” justifications of colonialism (Townshend 1990, 107) were less closely observed by those otherwise enthused by his critique of imperialism. The newly



forming academic discipline of international relations, as represented by Nicholas Spykman and Nathaniel Peffer, among others, gave added scholarly credibility to the fear of “backward races” gaining “resource sovereignty” and its implications for access by “whites” (Vitalis 2020, 39). Yet the Columbia School’s arguments in favor of access to markets remained largely ignored, especially as the Great Depression led to the collapse of global trade and intensified colonial exploitation. This was despite a flurry of publications in 1936 and 1937 indicating “the adoption by elites in the United States and Great Britain” of Norman Angell’s argument that colonies “did not pay” (Vitalis 2020, 41). Conveniently, however, this realization justified the refusal to return to Germany its former colonies and possessions that had been appropriated during World War I. Nevertheless, the Open Door was to regain and surpass its position in the US policy pantheon following World War II.

Victory over Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan was soon overshadowed by nascent Cold War paranoia and a resurgence of resource scarcity ideology, in which nature itself, nationalist “fanatics” fighting or victorious against colonial occupiers in “‘colored’ countries,” and of course the Soviet bloc were all separately or in concert threatening to deprive the United States of access to strategically vital natural resources (Vitalis 2020, 42–43). As in the 1920s, many of imperialism’s apologists proposed “that colonial rule be recast in the real interests of dependent peoples,” whose countries’ resources were to be regarded as “a trust for the world” (Vitalis 2020, 48). But Franklin Roosevelt’s administration was not going to make Woodrow Wilson’s mistake of losing the peace after having designed the League of Nations specifically to serve US Open Door policy.

With no little hubris, postwar reconstruction planning began in Washington before the US was even in the war . . . The “Open Door Policy” of the first years of the twentieth century attempted to wedge the United States into “the China trade,” dominated by the Europeans and Japanese, and Roosevelt now sought to globalize this strategy. (Smith 2005, 92)

Vitalis is particularly concerned with correcting what he persuasively argues to be a significant shortcoming in much of the US New Left’s analysis of imperialism as synonymous with colonialism, taking “virtually all the arguments [of the Beltway insiders such as George Kennan] at face value. All the more so if it found a president or other official expressing these beliefs in a once-classified document” (Vitalis 2020, 50). In other words, the New Left unwittingly legitimated illegitimate US power by ignoring the realities of the “Open Door” policy’s reliance on market access, as opposed to colonialism’s direct control. It was not that the New Left was wrong to attack colonialism; rather, it was wrong to accept policymakers’ official explanations equating it with imperialism to the exclusion of all else. This irony was given further

depth by the significant intervention in 1959 of William Appleman Williams, who, acknowledging Culbertson's earlier work, very clearly distinguished between the imperialism of territorial expansion and that of the "Open Door" variety that Culbertson had advocated (Williams 2009). Yet despite the even earlier analyses and arguments of Hobson and Angell, and a formal commitment "to overseas market expansion rather than territorial aggrandizement" (Vitalis 2020, 51), there has been no end of adventurism and decisive military intervention in practice: on Africa alone, see the recent study by Susan Williams (2021). This is consistent with the policy foundations laid during the presidencies of Wilson and Roosevelt, depicted as "the market-centered pacification of the world" by Neil Smith in his study of globalization (Smith 2006, 8). It was "the worldview that naturalized and legitimated US economic expansion" (Vitalis 2020, 51). In this endeavor, Vitalis rehabilitates, among various others, three significant and more recent refutations of the prevailing discourse.

### Reality Checks and Unreality Imbalances

The oil crisis of 1973 is shown by Vitalis to have been one of the most contrived "bogeys" of all. There was no OPEC embargo—it was the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (minus holdout Iraq) in October of that year that announced a staged reduction in the export of oil to certain countries, the United States foremost among them. This required a small adjustment to US imports as these were re-routed to non-Arab producers, before the Arab "embargo" fizzled out completely. Nevertheless, US allies in OPEC, chiefly Saudi Arabia and Iran, quadrupled the posted price of oil "to keep up with what frightened buyers were willing to pay for oil on the market" (Vitalis 2020, 58). Subsequently a veritable accumulation of myth has shrouded these facts in the service of oil scarcity ideology. However, despite the prevailing policy discourse and its supporting, erroneous assumptions, economist Morris A. Adelman had already even prior to the "embargo" dismissed talk of energy crises and "the oil weapon" as the "crisis" unfolded, instead reminding his readers of what the "Open Door" advocates had understood already for decades: "oil producers, friendly or radically opposed to US policies alike, would continue to sell their oil to pay for all the goods, services, prisons, palaces, weapons, and so on that it buys" (Vitalis 2020, 16; see also Adelman 1995; for a similar conclusion from a Marxist standpoint, see Bina 2022, 11n10).

This did not stop a by now firmly established academic international relations industry from eventually converging in agreement on oil's status as "*the* commodity over which rival powers are imagined to have been locked in combat since the end of World War I" (Vitalis 2020, 126). Against this, Vitalis highlights the intervention of Ronnie Lipschutz, whose 1989 book *When Nations Clash* decried the "hysteria" surrounding US policy in the Persian Gulf and the feared threat of Soviet efforts to cut off the supply

of oil. He also notes that, despite Lipschutz's correction of the international relations discipline's errors, his book "went unreviewed in all professional [peer-reviewed] journals," save for "a signature two-liner" in *Foreign Affairs* (Vitalis 2020, 184; see also Lipschutz 1989). Not without significance, the author of the foreword to *When Nations Clash*, John P. Holdren, stated very baldly that "We are in the Middle East more to protect our status as a superpower than to protect access to oil for oil's sake" (quoted by Lipschutz 1989, xxii–xxiii; see also Vitalis 2020, 127, 185). Holdren later served on the Presidential Council of Advisers on Science and Technology throughout President Clinton's terms of office, and was Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy throughout President Obama's terms.

The third recommended reality check of particular note is David Spiro's study of petrodollar recycling, in which the United States via Treasury Secretary William Simon forged a deal with the Saudi regime in 1974, whereby OPEC would sell oil exclusively in US dollars and in return the Saudis would invest in Treasury bonds and later also "to US corporations under the auspices of a US–Saudi Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation." As Vitalis notes, this is a "story that journalists seem to rediscover every decade" (Vitalis 2020, 89; Spiro 1999). But Spiro's careful excavation was quickly re-buried in a new layer of mythology in which US–Saudi cooperation was now dated back to 1945, when President Franklin Roosevelt met briefly with Ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy and is claimed to have agreed an "oil for security" pact. While the meeting did indeed take place, there was no such pact. Despite Ibn Saud's requests for an alliance, both Roosevelt and Truman declined, although Roosevelt did give the king a wheelchair (Vitalis 2020, 93). It was only in 2002, with the George W. Bush administration's frenetic efforts to protect US–Saudi relations following the cataclysmic events of the previous September that press reports and "scholarship" began to record the "fact" of Roosevelt's pact with Ibn Saud (Vitalis 2020, 88).

The apotheosis of this spirited, coordinated, imaginative recreation of history is *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman's communication of this new light to his credulous readers (Vitalis 2020, 109–116), although to single him out would be to ignore a pattern readily discernable in the orientalist "reporting" of US–Saudi relations over decades. According to this pattern, the king, while an ally, is bound to tradition and harbors suspicion and even a degree of hostility to the enlightened Westerners, who see hope instead in the person of the ordained Crown Prince, invariably a modernizer with socially liberal sympathies, eager to bring his country into the contemporaneous century, only to disappoint upon inheriting the crown. Whereupon the pattern is repeated, *ad infinitum*, or perhaps better, *ad nauseam*, given the accommodations made by successive US administrations—posturing as defenders of human rights—toward a regime that has a very different concept and system of justice (131).

Nevertheless, while Vitalis successfully dispels the “oil for security” mythology that serves to justify the status of Saudi Arabia as a key ally (and which continues to blight otherwise well-informed commentary, see Friedman 2023, 164–165), he underplays the role played by Saudi Arabia in ensuring the pricing of oil in US dollars, following Treasury Secretary Simon’s agreement with the Saudi regime in 1974, and the renewal of that agreement by President Jimmy Carter’s Treasury Secretary Michael Blumenthal in 1977 (Spiro 1999, x). The abandonment of the gold standard by the Nixon administration in 1971 (effectively the largest sovereign default in history) freed the United States from the obligations of honoring its financial obligations by inaugurating

the US Treasury bill standard . . . Instead of being able to use their dollars to buy American gold, foreign governments found themselves able to purchase only US Treasury obligations (and, to a much lesser extent, US corporate stocks and bonds). (Hudson 2003, 17)

As Michael Hudson points out, this was not a premeditated outcome, but its “unanticipated virtues” did not take long to be realized, such that trade surplus countries were compelled to “extend forced loans to the US Government” while Third World countries “were forced to block their own industrialization and agricultural modernization” (Hudson 2003, 22, 23).

The significance of this arrangement is explained by Henry C. K. Liu:

World trade is now a game in which the US produces dollars and the rest of the world produces things that dollars can buy. The world’s interlinked economies no longer trade to capture a comparative advantage; they compete in exports to capture needed dollars to service dollar-denominated foreign debts and to accumulate dollar reserves to sustain the exchange value of their domestic currencies. To prevent speculative and manipulative attacks on their currencies, the world’s central banks must acquire and hold dollar reserves in corresponding amounts to their currencies in circulation. The higher the market pressure to devalue a particular currency, the more dollar reserves its central bank must hold. This creates a built-in support for a strong dollar that in turn forces the world’s central banks to acquire and hold more dollar reserves, making it stronger. This phenomenon is known as dollar hegemony, which is created by the geopolitically constructed peculiarity that critical commodities, most notably oil, are denominated in dollars. Everyone accepts dollars because dollars can buy oil. The recycling of petro-dollars is the price the US has extracted from oil-producing countries for US tolerance of the oil-exporting cartel since 1973. By definition, dollar reserves must be invested in US assets, creating a capital-accounts surplus for the US economy. (Liu 2002)

Since then, this hegemony has become an instrument of more overt coercion. Originally developed as part of President George W. Bush's "War on Terror" (Zarate 2013), dollar weaponization has since become a more liberally applied punitive sanction, used to target individuals, organizations and countries alike. Given the primacy of the US dollar in global trade, this is a particularly powerful weapon, given the dollar hegemony described by Liu above. Any payment made in US dollars must go through the US banking system, even if the transaction involves parties outside of the United States. This is demonstrated in Tony Norfield's example of a Chinese company's purchase of Venezuelan oil:

The company in each country will likely have a US dollar account with their local banks. However, these accounts will be *held* in the US monetary system, possibly via a US "correspondent" bank with which they have dealings or the US branch of a relevant Chinese or Venezuelan bank, if it is allowed to operate in the US. The Chinese company will tell its bank to credit the Venezuelan company's dollar account with \$50m, either by deducting the sum from its existing dollar account or by asking the bank to deduct an appropriate amount of its local currency into dollars. In either case, it is the US-based bank that will, on behalf of the Chinese company, transfer \$50m to the account of the Venezuelan company at another US-based bank. The dollar transfer is made via a payments system based in the US, either the Fedwire Funds Service, or, more usually, the Clearing House Interbank Payments system, a privately run international bank-owned system whose membership is regulated by the US government. (Norfield 2016, 170)

Being cut off from the US banking system would severely damage a major company's international business operations, so the real power of this sanction is that it rarely has to be implemented. A number of major international banks in Europe and Japan have escaped this penalty after paying hundreds of millions of dollars in fines to the US government, apologizing profusely and promising not to do it again. The US has found it easy to threaten other countries in this way when it so wishes. The fact that there has been widespread compliance with US policy, particularly in Europe, indicates that financial power is a tool that can be used against other rich countries, not only those that are evidently subordinate in the world hierarchy. (Norfield 2016, 172)

As economists are usually proud to point out, deployment of such weaponry is likely to create incentives: either comply with the policies of the United States, or seek ways to reduce dollar dependency altogether. It is recourse to the latter option that has predictably gathered pace, especially following the unprecedented

expulsion of Iran from the Society of Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system in March 2012. Since then, as threats to expel other countries have become normalized along with targeted sanctions, there has been an acceleration of efforts by non-Western countries to develop alternatives to dollar hegemony (Demarais 2022). Greater reliance on the weaponized dollar by the United States has resulted in the development of separate payment systems—China’s China International Payments System (CIPS) was launched in 2015, while Russia’s System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS) gained parliamentary approval in 2019, with a number of countries eager to use the system, including India, which is also involved in discussions over how to link both systems (Nölke 2023, 147–148). Meanwhile, the BRICS countries in 2014 established the New Development Bank, which, despite its relatively modest scale,

is one of the most important economic challenges to the position of the major powers since 1945 . . . The NDB will offer many trade and investment contracts that are outside the orbit of the Anglo-American system, in particular contracts that do not depend on using the US currency. (Norfield 2016, 223)

Taken alongside the expanding security architecture of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Marochkin and Bezborodov 2022) and growing Global South support for an alternative to dollar payments as voiced by Brazil’s President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Leahy and Lockett 2023), Agathe Demarais’ warnings about the unintended but predictable consequences of a weaponized dollar ring ever more true. The performance of Russia’s economy following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has defied all predictions of collapse, with the sanctions imposed since 2014 and tightened in 2022 even described as being “in the nature of a gift” (Galbraith 2023, 12), not least because it freed Russia from a host of international commitments to free market orthodoxy that would have otherwise limited its ability to engage in activist economic and industrial policies.

## **The Trump Interregnum: Aberration or Precursor of More Lasting Change?**

President Donald Trump came into office having promised significant change to various aspects of domestic and foreign policy that were held responsible for the electorate’s widespread disaffection with an orthodoxy that had yielded deindustrialization and deepening economic immiseration for the US working class. This had led to an almost catastrophic financial crisis culminating in the failure of Lehman Brothers bank in September 2008, and a resultant global credit freeze that required state intervention on an unprecedented scale, and notably contrary to the

prevailing “wisdom” with respect to the appropriate role of government in a properly capitalist economy. The Bush administration’s decision to allow Lehman Brothers to collapse gave birth to the expression “too big to fail,” such was the complexity and scale of Lehman’s activities worldwide. A similarly laissez-faire approach to legal intervention in pursuit of wrongdoers by the Obama administration gave rise to two movements within the United States, “Occupy” and the “Tea Party,” both of which were nominally opposed to the status quo, but only the latter generated any real change by forming the basis of what became Trump’s core support and his ultimate takeover of the Republican Party.

Despite campaign promises to invest in infrastructure and reverse US economic decline, Trump reverted to traditional tax cutting, social conservatism (especially in judicial appointments), and expansion of the military budget. Only in two significant respects did he represent a change: trade and foreign policy. With respect to trade, Trump signaled an end to the neoliberal “Open Door” principles that had justified US-led globalization (Greider 1997; Smith 2005; De Graaff and van Apeldoorn 2021). Instead, he withdrew from the Obama administration’s Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (along with the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership designed to force policy changes on China via the latter’s exclusion from both) (Overholt 2015) and adopted a particularly hostile bilateral stance with regard to trade relations with China, by 2017 accounting for 47% of the US trade deficit (Huang and Slosberg 2023), amid a more general reorientation to managed trade that was routinely (and often pejoratively) described as “transactional” (Daalder 2020). While Trump’s attempt to alter the course of foreign policy was neutered even before he took office, via the engineered and ultimately disproven “Russiagate” scandal (Durham 2023) that cast Trump as a stooge (and even traitor in the service) of the Russian regime (Cohen 2022; Sakwa 2021; Boyd-Barrett and Marmura 2023), his nationalistic trade policy has, if anything, been intensified by the Biden administration, which has made it an issue of national security (Feroz 2023, 19). This latter aspect in itself is surprising only in that it has taken so long for economic reality to bite.

The Biden administration has also taken an even more aggressive stance toward China, targeting semiconductor technology as of crucial importance in preventing China from achieving parity with or even surpassing the United States (Sheehan 2022). Semiconductors have even been described as “the new oil,” such is their economic importance (Fitch and Ip 2023). This is part of a more profound shift toward mercantilism in economic thinking within US policymaking circles (if not among academic economists), heralded in advance of Trump’s presidency by a revealing yet somewhat under-noticed book by two policy insiders, one a former US ambassador to India and deputy national security adviser to President George W. Bush, the other a Special Assistant to President Biden for two years and former adviser to Hillary Clinton (Blackwill and Harris 2016).

Trump's symbolically important first state visit was to Saudi Arabia, where an arms deal worth \$110 billion was signed. This was merely a continuation of US policy since 1974. More significantly, however, Trump reversed key aspects of his predecessor's Middle East policy by aligning more firmly with Saudi interests in attempting to isolate Iran (Ahmadian 2018, 142). This was and remains the goal of Israel, Trump's second port of call as president. There soon followed the signing of the Abraham Accords,

a breakthrough agreement that established an anti-Iranian coalition of Arab states, the US, and Israel . . . signaled that the Palestinian issue was no longer seen by Washington or by many Arab states as the number one issue in the region. Rather, Iran's expansion was highlighted. (Jeffrey 2021, 17)

President Joe Biden took office having promised to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" following the murder of the journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in October 2018. Within 18 months of taking office Biden was visiting that country to persuade (more accurately, entreat) its leaders to engineer an acceleration of oil production among OPEC members in response to rising global prices and resurgent domestic inflation, following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 and the consequent tightening of energy supplies due to economic sanctions. In contrast to Trump's visit, however, upon arrival Biden was not greeted by King Salman or even Crown Prince Mohammed, but instead by the governor of Mecca and the Saudi ambassador to the US (McKernan 2022). Even after claiming success in achieving the desired boost to oil production, the United States was rebuffed by Saudi officials who stated that any increase would be based on demand. Meanwhile, in response to Biden's effort to discuss human rights, the Crown Prince raised "US troops' abuse of prisoners at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison as he sought to question Washington's human rights record," effectively closing that line of discussion (Schwartz and Al-Atrush 2022).

Since then, Saudi Arabia has taken the United States by surprise by agreeing a restoration of diplomatic relations with Iran in a deal brokered by China (Al-Atrush and Bozorgmehr 2023). Following a state visit by China's President Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, both countries have intensified economic cooperation to unprecedented levels, with China's consistency of commitment cited as a telling contrast to the unpredictability of US policy (Sun 2023). Saudi Arabia recently became an official dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which Iran became a full member (*Reuters* 2023). In response, the United States scrambled a response to its loosening grip in the Middle East by announcing visits to Saudi Arabia by first National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in May, quickly followed by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken on 7 June



(Bhadrakumar 2023). A clear indication of the loss of US credibility with Saudi leaders was the official photograph of Blinken sitting with Crown Prince Mohammed, without the US flag behind him to match that of the Saudi flag behind his host, in a highly visible snub and breach of diplomatic protocol (*Al-Jazeera* 2023). This was repeated during Blinken's whistle-stop tour of the region following the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas in October. Instead of being rushed to meet his hosts, he was "kept waiting for several hours" before meeting Crown Prince Mohammed the next morning (Hudson and Parker 2023).

The unpredictability of US foreign policy and its damaging impact on its credibility as a champion of the "rules-based order" was encapsulated by Blinken's arrival later that June in Beijing, "sans red carpet," to meet President Xi in a seat looking up at his host sitting at the head of a long table. China's official statement following the meeting emphasized the need for and desirability of cooperation, and appeared to indicate an unlikely success for Blinken. Within days Biden had undermined his Secretary of State, prompting a stern rebuke from China's foreign ministry (Pierson and Wong 2023).

Biden is well known for gaffes and malapropisms about world leaders that have complicated American foreign policy, prompting damage limitation as several administration officials scrambled to play down the kerfuffle. Nevertheless, the frequency and manner of such outbursts are indicative of an administration struggling to maintain a consistent line with its allies, let alone rivals. Unpredictability was supposed to have been consigned to history along with Trump, but as *Financial Times* chief foreign affairs columnist Gideon Rachman elaborates, there is deep unease among US allies over the Biden administration's treatment of trade as a security issue (not in itself heresy, especially given the lessons of the coronavirus pandemic), as evidenced by what he describes as Sullivan's "highly ambitious effort to pull together the domestic and international goals of the Biden administration—and turn them into a coherent whole" (quoted by Rachman 2023). To a certain extent, Sullivan appears to confirm the original insight of Trump with respect to the linkage of free trade with declining living standards for the US working class and the need for revitalization of the high-end manufacturing industry. Yet, an intervention of this nature made so late in the presidential term suggests hasty *ex post* rationalization as opposed to careful consideration: "Like the Reagan revolution, this shift will take years to play out (details are a work in progress)" (Ferozhar 2023, 19).

Persistent incoherence, exemplified by the regular clarifications, reassurances, and even entreaties by senior administration personnel such as Sullivan in response to the impact of ill-considered statements and actions of key individuals, often including the same senior administration personnel, are the expression of a more general decline in both intellectual and diplomatic standards that afflicts the

United States (Martyanov 2021, 138–140). Among its origins are the hubris of the “unipolar moment” that characterized the Clinton administration’s aggressive pursuit of a global “Open Door” policy (Greider 1997), and its catastrophic treatment of post-Soviet Russia (Cohen 2001), not to mention the Asian Crisis that unfolded in 1997 (Johnson 2000). Many Biden administration staffers served under President Bill Clinton and appear to have retained the triumphalist mindset that justified NATO’s (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) eastward expansion in breach of the promise given to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990, as confirmed by the documents published by the National Security Archive at George Washington University on December 12, 2017 (Cohen 2022, 147–148). Subsequent administrations continued to pursue these policies, until Trump’s rejection of free-trade orthodoxy heralded a sea change in US trade relations that Biden has intensified, consigning the World Trade Organization (a large part of the “rules-based order”) to near irrelevance. As for policy toward Russia, Trump’s efforts to overcome institutional resistance to any reset were stymied even before he took office, and undermined relentlessly thereafter, with deleterious consequences (Cohen 2022). The myth that no such promise was made to Gorbachev is as entrenched as “oil for security.”

With a presidential election looming in 2024 and, at the time of writing, Trump apparently set to be the Republican Party’s nominee once again, the Biden administration has effected a number of far-reaching and possibly irreversible changes that combine elements of Trump’s policy shifts with a vigorous reassertion of geopolitical resolve that involves the encirclement of Eurasia via NATO expansion to its west and the AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and United States Security Partnership) pact with Australia and Britain, designed to commit Australia financially and politically to a role as a regional naval outpost for the containment of China, much to the dismay of former prime minister Paul Keating and others within Australia’s political establishment (Keating 2021; Karp 2023). The continuities connecting policy in both theaters of operations are striking:

What the US is doing against China is almost a reproduction of the strategy of using NATO as a tool to expel Russia in Europe since the 1990s. The consequence is that Russia has almost no meaningful voice in Europe on security, and even its legitimate security concerns are ultimately being fulfilled in fierce conflict with the West; and economically, Russia has also been left out. (Cheng 2022, 7)

It will be very difficult for any future administration with a different foreign policy agenda to change course, given both the “facts on the ground”—including the “eight hundred or so” foreign military bases (Vine 2015, 5)—and the evident refusal of many senior personnel within the federal government, military, and

policymaking sectors to accommodate policies that in any way threaten to dislodge this consensus, as Trump was repeatedly forced to acknowledge. It would require sufficiently convincing reassurance on the part of any future President of the United States to persuade world leaders not only of their sincerity but especially their ability to enact policies promoting peace, given the powerful interests fronted by neoconservative ideologues determined to further the “agenda of (re-) establishing the United States as a ‘moral power’ on behalf of the ‘global good’” (Homolar-Riechmann 2009, 180). Whatever the definition of “good,” the proclamation of a “new world order” by President George H. W. Bush following the end of the Cold War, at whose heart lay “a quite explicit commitment to an open world market economy policed by America” (Cox 1997, 88), laid the foundations of a globalist project that remains ideologically hegemonic within the apparatus of the US state. It was the first President Bush whose administration elevated neoconservatives to positions of authority, and their presence has been a constant across all subsequent administrations, including Trump’s, albeit in varying quantity and influence. Under Biden, their influence appears to have at least equaled that achieved during the administration of George W. Bush.

The “new world order” was consistent with the already firmly entrenched “Open Door” policy’s reliance on unrestricted market access for US corporations and investors, except that what was reliance has become an insistence that respects no challenge, no matter how substantial. For developing countries or “emerging markets” this has been the case ever since the structural adjustment programs of the Washington Consensus, but for even fellow members of the G7, US pressure to adhere to its geopolitical agenda has also intensified. The European Union is under increasing pressure to disengage economically from China, regardless of the costs, with individual member states strongly urged to prevent the export of goods regarded as enabling China to achieve technological superiority over the United States. The Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, has claimed that the government of the Netherlands has been “bullied” into preventing exports to China by chip equipment supplier ASML (Advanced Semiconductor Material Lithography), whose deep ultraviolet lithography systems are essential for the manufacture of the most advanced semiconductors. More generally, according to De Croo, European companies are being approached directly to redirect investment to the United States in order to exploit the subsidies made available by the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 (see Bounds 2023).

The misnamed Inflation Reduction Act forms one half of the Biden administration’s economic strategy. Ostensibly promoting a transition to green and “clean” technology by creating a \$369 billion support scheme, it is also designed to encourage “reshoring” of manufacturing industry to the United States, recognizing both the negative security implications of fragile global supply chains and the

domestic political consequences of further economic stagnation and working-class immiseration. Predictably, however, the creation of what amounts to a “special economic zone” is already yielding displacement effects, as European and Asian corporations reorient their investment plans to take advantage of the subsidies (Milne, Nilsson, and Campbell 2023, 1), as opposed to generating genuinely new economic activity. While mercantilists might not view the subsidies involved in the relocation of already-intended investments as “deadweight” or redundant, they nevertheless represent a net reduction in the aggregate value generated by these investments (see Squires and Hall 2013), not to mention an absolute reduction in the value generated in those locations that would otherwise have hosted them.

While the Inflation Reduction Act might be seen as the “carrot” element of the current US policy, the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022<sup>1</sup> represents the “stick.” Its dramatic reconfiguration of the global trade environment is captured by a recent contribution to the literature of International Business Studies. Until now, this literature has taken a broadly, not always even implicitly, positive view of the reduction of trade barriers and extension of “openness, rules, and multilateral cooperation”—the “Open Door” writ large. With the passage of the CHIPS and Science Act, however, the globalization juggernaut has suddenly veered off course. The Act

exhibits a few features that fit a larger pattern of techno-nationalism that the United States has recently adopted. First, it relinquishes free-trade rules and flies in the face of America’s traditional policy stance of championing an open and rules-based multilateral system by accentuating market-distorting and pro-subsidy industrial policies. Investment-screening regimes are increasingly muscular guardians of corporate control, and export controls are at the front line of the innovation race between America and China. All this has heralded a new era of zero-sum thinking, raising concerns about the US willingness to lead and defend the global rules-based system as we know it, presenting what we believe to be the dawn of a new techno-nationalist era in US policy. Second, the Act pursues the weaponization of global value chains as a new tool of this techno-nationalism, which will require MNEs (multinational enterprises) to carefully consider geopolitical alliances and rivalries in the configuration of their activities around the world. Concerned with risks to national security and competition with China, the United States has obstinately been considering and adopting even more measures beyond the Act to further scrutinize inbound investments from China, while also preparing to control outbound exports and investments to China. (Luo and Van Assche 2023, 2)

The bipartisan commitment of US leaders to defend its technological leadership, especially with respect to the national security state, was already firmly enshrined (Weiss 2014), ritual adherence to free market nostrums notwithstanding. Yet China’s

rapid economic rise (Kennedy 2023) and the carnage in Ukraine have exposed both NATO countries' lack of productive capacity to maintain weapons stocks (Rathbone, Pfeifer, and Chávez 2022) and the vulnerability of advanced US military technology in battle (Goldman 2023). The overriding objective of US "full spectrum dominance" (Shaw 2016) is facing serious challenges, both geopolitical and technological. As regards the latter, the failure of US military equipment against that of Russia in Ukraine appears to confirm Andrei Martyanov's earlier contention that US leadership in military technology has already been surpassed (Martyanov 2018).

Of the sources of power in international relations identified by Spykman—persuasion, purchase, barter, and coercion (see Anderson 2013, 13)—the United States is compensating its apparent loss of persuasiveness (hegemony) with increased reliance on coercion where it cannot purchase or barter. As noted by Manfred Steger (2005), this change from an impersonal and (nominally) impartial market-led globalism to a more overtly imperial version marked the administration of President George W. Bush, at least rhetorically, although the Asian Crisis and ruinous treatment of Russia occurred earlier under the Clinton administration (Johnson 2000, 213). While the administration of President Barack Obama acquired a reputation for greater realism in foreign policy, in contrast to its unilateralist predecessor (O'Connor and Cooper 2021), in reality it was heavily involved in Ukraine, with Vice President Biden taking a particularly strong personal interest from the beginning (Espinas 2010; see also De Ploeg 2017). For all Trump's supposed transactional bluster, it is the Biden administration that is reasserting hard power on a scale that is unprecedented in the post-World War II period (with respect to directly challenging great powers) and that upends the rules it claims to represent and defend. Should Trump (or any dissident Democratic Party candidate like Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., now declaring himself an independent) win in 2024, the political landscape will be such that any significant change of foreign policy will be almost impossible to effect, regardless of the wishes of the new administration. Mission accomplished?

## Situational Logic and the Unreason of State

As *Oilcraft* assuredly demonstrates, Saudi Arabia is a particularly revealing example of the consequences of the Biden administration's careless neglect of diplomatic norms and inconsistency of policy. Successive administrations have worked assiduously to cultivate a close relationship whose publicly stated *raison d'être* has been permanently at odds with the reality, as firmly established by Vitalis. Nevertheless, it was treated as a fundamental part of US foreign policy and security strategy. Yet, having inherited what was one of the Trump administration's few consolidations and even enhancements of its predecessors' policies, the Biden administration and the security and intelligence apparatus very quickly alienated a

key ally of long standing. Its prominent defense of human rights and liberal democratic norms more generally, as part of its foreign policy strategy, were augmented by a specific rebuke of Saudi Arabia on the basis of the publication of the Central Intelligence Agency's report into the murder of Khashoggi in February 2021 (Pazzanese 2021). This made Biden's subsequent effort to placate Saudi Arabia in the service of gaining lower oil prices all the more humiliating, especially as the rise in prices could be attributed directly to the Biden administration's policies toward Russia, throwing into question the coherence of its overall strategy.

Nevertheless, there are important lacunae in *Oilcraft's* account of the Columbia School's critique of imperialism and inter-war debates more generally. A major absence in Vitalis's otherwise deeply enlightening study of US policy pathologies through the prism of its relationship with Saudi Arabia is any mention of historian Charles A. Beard (1934). As elaborated at length by Clyde W. Barrow, Beard's analysis of US policies treated foreign and trade relations as an extension of *domestic* economic policy and, in particular, a result of the *failures* of domestic economic policy.

In Beard's grand conception of American history, a dialectic of economic class interests propelled American political development forward, but at each critical juncture concerted efforts at domestic reform were diverted into international conflicts as popular leaders backed down from the enormous political struggle entailed by a head-to-head confrontation with the capitalist class. (Barrow 1997, 251)

Beard's reputation as an "isolationist" is based on his opposition to US entry into World War II, but his fear that "the outward thrust of imperialism would eviscerate the social-democratic promise of the early twentieth century by entangling the United States in an endless series of military and political diversions that would siphon off economic reserves and political energy into a permanent war economy" was based on a more profound analysis of the US political economy that transcends the internationalist/isolationist dichotomy that remains the standard reference for any appraisal of US foreign policy (Barrow 1997, 251–252; see also Barrow 2000, ch. 6). Without a redistribution of *wealth* (as opposed to merely income) and a redefinition of the property rights appertaining to types of wealth, the US economy was structurally predisposed to imbalances that ultimately would drive the sort of adventurism he feared and which others like Chalmers Johnson later condemned. Here the influence of Hobson is apparent (and later acknowledged by Beard; see Barrow 2000, 194). In contrast to his Columbia School contemporaries' approval of the "Open Door" supposedly felicitous consequences for the United States and its moral superiority to colonialism, he predicted exactly the sort of foreign policy quagmire that was later described by Johnson as "the suicide option" (Johnson 2010, 7). As Beard characterized it, the "Open Door"

is borrowed in part from a misleading formula of that diplomacy which ostensibly seeks the welfare of the United States by pushing and holding doors open in all parts of the world with all engines of government, ranging from polite coercion to the use of arms. (Beard 1934, vii)

What explains the apparent compulsion to unreason? There are certainly compelling economic reasons, mainly to do with what President Dwight D. Eisenhower famously described as the “military-industrial complex” and which more recently Linda Weiss has portrayed as the hidden industrial policy supporting the national security state (Weiss 2014). The massive arms deal that Trump signed with Saudi Arabia in 2017 was justified as creating jobs, generating economic development, and enriching the United States by Trump himself, but he stands out only with respect to hyperbole: “Trump’s desire to create wealth from arms sales has been more transparent than most, but every president since Clinton has made clear in policy documents that economic benefits are a key consideration of the arms sales approval process” (Thrall, Cohen, and Dorminey 2020, 101). That would seem to be merely written confirmation of a policy already firmly established: in 1981 Andrew Pierre stated that “Arms sales are far more than an economic occurrence, a military relationship, or an arms control challenge—*arms sales are foreign policy writ large*” (Pierre 1981, 266–267; emphasis in original). To underline this point, he reports,

Arms transfers worldwide have more than doubled in the past decade, from \$9.4 billion in 1969 to over \$20 billion in 1980 (in constant 1977 dollars). The United States has been the largest supplier during this period and has seen its foreign military *sales* (as distinct from arms *delivered*, and measured so as to include items such as training and logistical assistance) rise from \$1.1 billion in 1970 to approximately \$16 billion today (in current dollars). (Pierre 1981, 266–267)

That is to say, already in 1980 the US accounted for approximately three quarters of the global arms trade.

Aside from mitigating a deteriorating balance of payments situation due to the decline of manufacturing in general (Rowthorn and Coutts 2004), a more strategic aspect of US arms sales has been their use as a means of undermining other countries’ sovereignty. This is highlighted in Victor McFarland’s analysis of the US response to the New International Economic Order (NIEO) (Hudson 2005) proclaimed by Third World countries in the 1970s. In what is today a familiar pattern, it began undermining established institutions like the United Nations by establishing the G6 (later G7) in 1975.

The United States also sought to divide the NIEO's proponents by building special relationships with the developing nations that had the most to offer the United States. This effort was focused in particular on the leading oil producers and sought to use the constraining effects of interdependence as a foreign policy tool. The US security relationships with nations like Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, served as a way to bind them to the United States. Lincoln Bloomfield, a Professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who directed MIT's project on interdependence, testified to Congress about weapons shipments to Saudi Arabia and Iran: "The best reason in favour of arms sales is summed up by what I would call 'deliberate interdependence.' By this is meant purposefully creating dependence on US spare parts, advice, and technology on the part of countries with the greatest capacity to make the industrial democracies depend on them." (McFarland 2015, 227)

Close military relationships with the leading oil producers had the additional benefit of enabling US officials to argue that by destabilizing the American economy and impairing the ability of the United States to maintain a large defence establishment, oil price increase threatened the security interests of Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the Gulf.

This is an aspect worth considering more deeply in the context of current NATO arms procurement policies that emphasize the significance of "interoperability" and the implications of that with respect to not only policy sovereignty but also technological dependence. Grey Anderson's recent reminder of military alliances' use as vehicles of "ensuring internal order, encouraging commerce and disseminating ideology" is particularly timely (Anderson 2023, 5). Australian unease over the AUKUS pact has further highlighted these issues (O'Connor, Cox, and Cooper 2023) as well as the problems arising from expensive weaponry that is demonstrably inferior to rival systems and which is even prone to failure. Relatedly, technological dependence becomes economic dependence: "Australia cannot maintain operational readiness on its own, because the United States undermines its sovereign independence by refusing to let it know how to repair numerous secret F-35 parts" (Toohey 2022). This is particularly unfortunate for a jet fighter plagued by problems throughout its life (Makichuk 2023). As a major customer of US weapons for decades, Saudi Arabia's rulers will be acutely aware of these issues.

Yet there is also an important ideological dimension that appears to explain and therefore justifies the choices made by policymakers, whether with respect to Saudi Arabia, Europe, or China. Here it is worth recalling Noonan's argument for recognition of the roles and functions of state leaders, whose frames of reference (especially in the English-speaking world) are shaped by the theories, perspectives



and renderings of history produced by approved think tanks (Diesen 2023), “expert” commentators and the institutional memory of ministries and departments staffed by a permanent cadre. State actors are necessarily involved in the day-to-day machinations and logics of the exercise, defense and expansion of power. With social media and other communications technologies more readily and widely available, and greatly amplified by traditional news media—itsself increasingly reliant on public relations releases as cheap sources of “news” (Davies 2009) and therefore integral to an echo chamber effect—strategy is often secondary to tactics, especially with respect to election campaigning (now an integral part of government) (Diamond 2019) and “controlling the narrative” (Wolff 2013), a practice satirized in Barry Levinson’s 1997 feature film starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert De Niro (1997), *Wag the Dog*. In this respect, too, domestic dysfunction can lead to foreign misadventure, as exposed by Vitalis’s earlier study of Aramco and the manner in which the United States first exported Jim Crow-style employment practices and then defeated efforts to reform these as well as helping to entrench the branch of the Saud family most amenable to US policy (Vitalis 2007). The “performative” purpose of military victory (however that is defined—removing Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi were “victories,” but what of their aftermath?) can serve to reassure or placate domestic constituencies while underlining to the rest of the world the status of the US as the world’s leading power (Butt 2019). Nevertheless, the hubris that such presumed supremacy can generate creates increasingly compelling incentives for other actors to reduce their risk exposure, as Saudi Arabia appears to be doing.

For Marxists accustomed to identifying the deeper, structural economic forces underpinning these apparently surface phenomena, it is perhaps easy to dismiss attention to such “ephemera” as mistaken. As a response, Althusser, following Gramsci and ultimately Marx, offers a way of recognizing contingency within a constraining yet dynamic structural development process. Ideology grounded in social practices becomes less persuasive as those practices yield less due to changing material conditions. Yet leaders, like others, take time to adjust to such changes, and thereby are at risk, whether to themselves as increasingly irrelevant, or to the (mis)led due to their failure to acknowledge new realities. In the case of the United States, performative wars against poorly equipped adversaries that succumb to “shock and awe” might once have served to keep the rest of the world in line, in addition to reinforcing the ideology of supremacy at home. More recent events suggest that such reinforcement has been so effective as to substitute for an objective analysis of global realities among its ruling elites, a process begun during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and intensified ever since (McGovern 2006, 91).

Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “passive revolution” highlighted the contrast between apparent upheaval and deeper continuity, captured famously in Giuseppe

Tomasi di Lampedusa's ([1958] 2008) novel *The Leopard*: if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change. This was prefigured by Alexander Herzen's verdict on the failed European revolutions of 1848–1849: “the departing world leaves behind it not an heir but a pregnant widow. Between the death of one and the birth of the other much water will flow by, a long night of chaos and desolation will pass” (quoted by Ascherson 2023, 3). Much the same can be said of the Trump presidency, whose initial shock to the system triggered a rapid and powerful mobilization of political forces that sought to discredit his election victory and those policies that were out of line with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and Pentagon orthodoxy, most especially rapprochement with Russia. For all the appearance of change, much remained as it was behind the White House theatrics.

Gramsci conceived of passive revolution as an example of a “universal concept with a geographical seat” (Hesketh 2017, 389). It sheds light on the way in which social relations can be reorganized in such a way as to ensure the continuity of class dominance without the upheaval of a genuine revolution or even substantive concessions to a mobilized proletariat or subaltern class coalition. The historical conditions in which these occur are, of course, unique, and are the basis of the inherent “unevenness” of capitalist development (Harootunian 2015), whereby a universalizing, historical constitutive process is forced to adapt to conditions on the ground, so to speak. The Trump presidency and the “Make America Great Again” movement supporting that (and its potential reinstatement) appears to be an example of passive revolution in which the CFR/Pentagon elites effectively stymie any substantive change of course with respect to foreign and security policy. In this they have been helped by Trump's personal idiosyncrasies and a lack of cadre sufficiently capable of furthering Trump's foreign policy agenda against such entrenched institutional resistance—witness the succession of National Security Advisers under Trump that began with Michael Flynn and later included John Bolton! What has changed since is the extent to which the Biden administration has enacted a very much more assertive economic interventionism going beyond trade rebalancing, and that has, as a central strategic goal, a reversal of the deindustrialization that created the conditions that gave rise to the political movement supporting Trump and the policies of Trumpism (Lachmann 2023).

## Pivoting Away

Recent events indicate that Saudi Arabia, among other countries, is at the very least hedging its “bets” by accepting China's brokering of an agreement with Iran, while showing the regime's deep displeasure with the Biden administration's conduct of policy. Linked to this agreement is a willingness to withdraw from the conflict in Yemen, prompted also by the Biden administration's withdrawal of

military support, and Congress's bipartisan rejection of a \$650 billion arms sales package in December 2021 (Friedman 2023, 163–164). Saudi Arabia has restored diplomatic and trade links with Turkey after years of open hostility, as part of its effort to “balance the reliance on the United States as an external-security guarantor with an institutionalized security architecture among Gulf states” (El Berni 2023). The countries recently signed various deals that involve both the purchase of Turkish military drones and the future establishment of joint production of these (Soylu 2023). Perhaps most significantly, the regime recognizes the unsustainability and insecurity of the “oil for security” myth and is actively investing in economic diversification away from oil (Sweidan and Elbargathi 2023). Among other measures, it has established a \$15 billion fund for investing in foreign mining operations that will secure access to resources such as iron ore, copper, nickel, and lithium (Hook and Dempsey 2023, 6). Whatever the pathologies of Western regimes seemingly committed to what Chalmers Johnson described as the “suicide option,” others are drawing their own conclusions and acting accordingly.

*Oilcraft* is a significant intervention and deserves wide reading. Its central analytical focus illuminates the deluded and self-deluding stories that policy elites might use knowingly at first to legitimate the illegitimate, but eventually come to believe themselves. As such, it is a very timely case study of the increasing detachment of ideological frameworks from the material realities they are intended to legitimate, to the point where that material reality is so far estranged as to make the ideology in all respects unsustainable.

## Note

1. For the details of the Act, please see <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/services/files/1201E1CA-73CB-44BB-ADEB-E69634DA9BB9>.

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