

## Interview with Dr. Robert “Bob” Vitalis



**CV:** My name is Casey VanSise. I am the current Thomas J. Davis Fellow at the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy (CENFAD) for the 2021-22 academic year. We are joined by [Dr. Robert Vitalis](#), who is [presenting for CENFAD](#) on his book [Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy](#), which was published by Stanford University Press in 2020, so we will be talking a bit about that here. So I guess just to start off with, on behalf of our audience, I was curious about the premise of the book. What is your thesis and what is the overall subject matter that you are examining?

**RV:** You know, it is pretty straightforward. And it is a short book – that is one of the other good things about it. It is punchy! And the basic argument is that most of what we believe about the geopolitics of oil is wrong. It cannot be supported empirically, and is based on accumulating factitious evidence



that, if one looks even a little deeply, one finds makes no sense.

**CV:** Well, very fascinating, and it is great to hear that you are making these sort-of novel inroads into that scholarship. I think many of us are overall familiar with, for instance, the Carter Doctrine and the ramifications of that, which I understand your book examines in detail, and just looking at how US energy policy reflects our geopolitical order, despite arguably being flawed in its premises. To follow from that, what do you think different disciplines will gain from your work? For instance, you are from the Political Science department at the University of Pennsylvania, and here at CENFAD, we like to do a lot of multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary work – between historians, political scientists, IR theorists, and everything in-between and beyond! So, for example, how can historians gain from your work, and how can political scientists gain from it as well?

**RV:** So, a couple of things about that. One is that it does not read nor should it be taken as an academic or scholarly book, because I have been taken to task by scholars—young assistant professors also writing on the subject—who will argue that the book is just too bold in its set of claims. I think a better way to think about it is as a polemic targeted at various cohorts and segments of intellectuals who presume to understand and advance theories or claims about the role of oil in US foreign policy generally. This includes everyone from those who argue that the United States delivers a public good to the world at large by being in the Persian

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Gulf, contending that if it were not in the Persian Gulf, chaos would reign in oil markets, to others holding views contrasting with people who believe that the United States is supplying a beneficent public good. This includes those on both the right and left who understand the United States as exercising some kind of hegemony or using its so-called “control” of the oil in the Persian Gulf in order to support its hegemony, with folks disagreeing on what that hegemony is about, and whether or not it is a good thing. What the book tries to say is that you have to think harder if you believe that, because there is not really a great deal of evidence to support any of that, other than what you have already come to believe.

**CV:** Sure, yeah. Very interesting! Obviously, you have an extensive body of work dealing with the Middle East. For instance, you wrote two books dealing with that region before this one – one specifically about Saudi Arabia, as I recall, and then you also had the book—

**RV:** [\*White World Order, Black Power Politics?\*](#)

**CV:** That is right, yes! And so you have this very extensive repertoire of work looking at the geopolitical order, and how a lot of our assumptions about the geopolitical order that undergird it are faulty, in many ways, or do have endemic flaws. So despite them being very different works, do you see insights from works like *White World Order, Black Power Politics*, and then also your earlier body of work on the Middle East, connecting to what you outline in *Oilcraft*?

**RV:** Okay. That is a great question. I think I did not realize this, save in retrospect, that you could analytically look at the four books I have written together – the first one on

business conflict in interwar Egypt leading up to the [Gamal Abdel] Nasser period [[\*When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt\*](#)]; the second being about the world that American oil companies in eastern Saudi Arabia built there in the era of oil exploration [[\*America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier\*](#)]; the third book on how American international relations as a discipline understands itself and its past [*White World Order, Black Power Politics*]; and then this new book *Oilcraft*. It turns out that all four of them were about myth-busting, in varieties of ways – from the first book, which was challenging [divergent] myths that had come to be [respectively] believed by Marxists and Egyptian nationalists writing about the Egyptian political economy, up to *Oilcraft*, which is really about challenging what I see as myths in multiple domains in how we talk about oil. That has been the project! It was more scholarly in earlier iterations, as I needed to secure tenure and get promoted, and this [most recent book] which meant to be much more, as I said, polemical. But it is also me trying to come to grips with what I once believed about US imperialism, oil in geopolitics, the United States-Saudi Arabia relationship, and so forth. So it is me working through ideas that I once held and advanced, and now realize are wrong.

**CV:** Sure. Stemming from that, I am interested in the ways that people of different ideological tendencies and persuasions have shifted as being either proponents or opponents of US entanglement in purportedly oil-related geopolitics. I recall that, in the introduction of your book, you stated that a lot of ideas about oil scarcity have been assimilated more by the academic left, and just the left in general, whereas before, conservatives were often greater proponents of those ideas,

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if I am not mistaken. So it is interesting to see this reversal of different ideological tendencies over time. I am curious about how you have seen the politics of “oilcraft,” as it were, evolving over time.

**RV:** Okay. There are many ways one could answer that, or I can geek out on this subject for days, but let us just take one example that I am struck by these days: I interviewed Douglas Feith for my book. Now, Feith was a key official involved in the 2003 Iraq War [as Undersecretary of Defense for Policy]. But Feith, to his credit, was someone who had long since abandoned what he called the “risk-gain” view of geopolitics in the world – that the world was running out of oil, states must struggle to control what was left of it, and that you needed to use state power to secure access to oil. Early on, he was taken under the wing of a kind-of iconoclastic economist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Morris Adelman, who I embrace in my book. And, however else we remember him—as a neoconservative, as an advocate for US foreign intervention—Feith’s argument went that the United States did not have to do anything to secure access to oil, or that any other state has to do anything in particular to secure access to oil, because the market will deliver it. According to him, the various threats that we imagined would stymie us are either not true, or not amenable to intervention, in the case of incidents like refinery fires or revolutions, and so forth, that might disrupt oil supply. There was no particular kind of action one had to take, so that “risk-gain” view of the world, which was a kind of geopolitics game from the Cold War, has been [mutually] embraced by two otherwise contending factions. Let me put it this way: you evoked the Carter Doctrine, which was formulated in the era of Zbigniew Brzezinski as Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor, and Sam

Huntington, the Harvard professor [who was] one of Carter’s main advisors. And, ostensibly, their view—Huntington, in particular—was that after the USSR invaded Afghanistan, it was clear evidence for them of the Soviets seeking to control Middle Eastern oil. [These policymakers] assumed that [the Soviets] were going to enter the Persian Gulf; take the Gulf over – though they never exactly explained how; and—this was what Huntington’s fear was—somehow the Soviets, by gaining control of that oil, would be able to wreck the alliance between the United States and Western Europe. So sitting behind that idea is that, somehow, the United States in the Persian Gulf is there to guarantee oil flows to its allies in the Cold War. But then you think about it a little bit more, and it is a kind of coercion in the last instance. The United States has this ability to influence or shape the policies of its allies via its so-called “control of oil.” The left loves that idea, because it argues, “Aha! This is the way that the United States exerts its hegemony over its capitalist allies, in Western Europe and Japan!” And what my book kind of says is, “Well, how do you know that, and can you show me any proof of this amazing weapon being used?” The reality is that there is zero proof of it. So it is something that you have to believe and almost see as commonsensical, that as a tool or a weapon, [oil’s] power—I call it “capillary power”—is that it simply exists, so that allies come into line knowing that the United States is holding that weapon in reserve in its exercise of power. Now how people know this, I have no idea! For me, it is conjured out of whole cloth, basically.

**CV:** I see. And I guess one final question following up from all of this is, to the extent that the insights in your book get assimilated into popular discourse, which it is certainly always hard to guarantee—

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**RV:** No, it is easy to guarantee that does *not* happen is what I would say, but go ahead.

**RV:** Thank you so much too, Casey!

**CV:** —but to the extent that you do perhaps see trendlines evolving along some of the lines that you have articulated in your book, what ramifications can you perhaps see moving forward – for example, in the US-Saudi relationship, or in the geopolitical order in general?

**RV:** Great question! So the argument and takeaway would be this: if what your fear is, or if why you support the continuous militarization by the United States of the Persian Gulf from the 1970s through the 1991 war to liberate Kuwait and on through the “forever wars” in the 2000s—if your belief is that it is necessary in order to secure the flow of oil, or oil at reasonable prices, and however else it is framed—guess what? You can relax, because it is absolutely not necessary. So you can feel good about calling for the demilitarization of that region. I am not guaranteeing you that you will succeed in doing that, because there are always a surfeit of rationales for military intervention. But the one that has been strongest for longest, especially among those who oppose intervention, is the belief that this is always about, as President Obama put it and many other presidents have put it, “guaranteeing the continuous access of Middle Eastern oil at reasonable prices.” Well, the US military buildup there has no role to play in that.

**CV:** Very good. So, once again for your audience, that book by Dr. Robert Vitalis is *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy*, and I would encourage everyone and anyone who is interested in this topic, and just anyone in general, to pick up a copy of that. Dr. Vitalis, thank you so much for your time!