

America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier. *By Robert Vitalis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xxvii + 353 pp. Photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-8047-5446-2.

Reviewed by Steffen Hertog

If good historiography is about unveiling hidden connections, then *America's Kingdom* must stand among the best that the discipline has to offer. Prima facie, Robert Vitalis addresses a highly specific subject matter: the history of U.S. oil consortium Aramco in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s, with a special focus on the company's local labor relations. Vitalis's narrative is set in explicit contrast to the quasi-official company history—still reproduced by journalists and other historians—of Aramco as enlightened harbinger of development and education in the underdeveloped kingdom. Instead, Vitalis argues, Aramco's labor policies institutionalized racism and inequality, and the company avoided its local development responsibilities where it could.

His ambition, however, is not merely to discredit the sanitized public-relations efforts of one large U.S. overseas company but to attack two much broader traditions of historiographic exceptionalism: the first one holding that the Saudi state has emerged independent of foreign influences; and the second, more important, one positing that American economic expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been benevolent, progressive, and radically different from that of other imperial powers.

Vitalis explains that Aramco was part of a larger global system of capitalist labor exploitation in the U.S.-owned mining industry. He highlights close parallels to U.S. mining operations in turn-of-century Arizona and Texas, and to early-twentieth-century oil industries in Mexico and Venezuela. Vitalis sees a continuity of "frontiers," and of the historical lies about them.

The Saudi case, then, is special only in that Aramco's racist system unfolded so late and so far away from home. Like other mining companies in other places before, Aramco in Saudi Arabia built up a "Jim Crow" system of racial segregation among its employees, suppressed labor rights and labor organization, and stalled on the delivery of

services to workers and their communities. It did so longer even than the British companies in neighboring Gulf countries, as the political pressures in the Saudi kingdom were less acute and the government could be counted on to suppress labor protest.

Housing, education, and infrastructure were either nonexistent for Saudi workers, or they were doubly or triply segregated according to nationality. Aramco's explanations for recurring labor unrest—outside agitators, communist subversion, regional politics—echoed those of other mining corporations while claiming that it was a pioneer in the paternal “uplift” of its local staff. If pressed, Aramco's blamed the conservatism of the Saudi government for the company's restrained role in local development.

In reality, the most committed proponents of development and reform in the kingdom were a number of young nationalists in the Saudi government, most of all King Saud's advisor Abdalaziz Muammar and oil minister Abdallah Tariki—both dreaded by Aramco. Their threat to the company was brief, however, as both were ousted by the royal family in the early 1960s and went into prison and exile, respectively, under Saud's successor Faisal. Whereas Muammar and Tariki were consistently pictured as unbalanced radicals by Aramco, the various ruling princes were talked either up or down according to their willingness to act as close U.S. allies.

The book presents a wealth of previously unknown facts and anecdotes, is written more wittily than any other Saudi-related book, and is meticulously referenced, drawing on sources from eight different (American) archives. It could have used a bit more editing, as typos are scattered through the text and a number of names are confused. Nevertheless, together with Nathan Citino's *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC* (2002), *America's Kingdom* sets a new standard for the historiography of U.S.–Saudi relations following decades in which journalists and “regional experts” have unquestioningly regurgitated Aramco's official history.

Vitalis states explicitly that his book is more about the United States than about Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, providing a bit more Saudi context would have added some perspective to the Aramco story: With little information about the general political environment in which figures like Muammar or Tariki operated, it is not possible to assess how realistic their ambitions were or whom they represented. On a larger historical scale, the technocratic progressivism of the early 1960s appears as just a blip,

made possible by a temporary split in the Al Saud family. Tariki's successors Zaki Yamani and Hisham Nazer, who had also started as "progressives," became more Aramco than any of the royals (at one point Yamani asked for an exemption from labor laws on Aramco's behalf, which was declined, in writing, by King Faisal himself).

Similarly, although labor unrest had local causes, the regional ideological trends of the time shaped the protest and its language, a context that cannot be grasped without a thorough familiarity with Gulf history. Conversely, only by appreciating the low level of political mobilization in 1950s Saudi Arabia is it possible to understand why labor protest could always be locally contained and why Aramco could function as a complete enclave.

The Aramco story also does not end in 1962, but continues throughout the 1970s, a decade in which the company was more engaged in supporting the Saudi private sector, building local manpower, and including Saudis in senior levels of management. Unlike other overseas oil operations, Aramco was taken over by the Saudi government on a negotiated basis, allowing the gradual transfer of assets and know-how. Perhaps this was a devil's pact between repressive royals and U.S. capital, but most educated Saudis who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s are deeply grateful for what the latter-day Aramco has done for Saudi development.

Conversely, many of the social pathologies Vitalis decries continue in Saudi Arabia independent of Aramco: Expatriates still live sterile lives in segregated compounds, and the labor market continues to be segmented by nationality and to deprive Asian guest workers of basic rights. Various forms of indentured servitude and large-scale ethnic division of labor both predated and succeeded Aramco's presence on Saudi soil.

There are limits to how much a single book on a country that has been so little studied can cover. Vitalis's account is accurate, riveting, and based on his own highly original interpretation of U.S. economic history. Aramco apologists will be hard put to challenge the author on the facts. It is easier to disagree with him on the moral standards applied to Saudi history. Does one criticize Aramco on an immanent basis, taking the claims of its corporate propaganda seriously and then refuting them, as Vitalis does?

Or does one evaluate Aramco from a consequentialist standpoint? Like many institutions of the time, Aramco might have been racist, and it might have badly fudged

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its history. But, equally, the company did, willy-nilly, build infrastructure and impart skills that the kingdom would never have acquired otherwise. This is a moral judgment the reader must arrive at alone—but it is one that can be properly made only after absorbing the full story that this book tells so elegantly.

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Correction: The final paragraph of Melvyn Dubofsky's review of *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* by Andrew E. Kersten, which appeared in the Autumn 2007 issue, was incorrectly edited. The paragraph should read as follows:

So do read this book if you want to learn about how AFL unions behaved during the World War II years. Its brief discussion of Great Britain may also help you understand why British workers gained a social-welfare state after World War II, while Harry Truman's Fair Deal produced a paler version of the policies of Britain's postwar Labour government.