

## King Oil

*The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*

By Daniel Yergin

Simon & Schuster. 877 pp. \$24.95

*By Max Holland*

Every author dreams about good timing, some stroke of luck that will distance his book from the pack of 50,000 titles published annually in the United States. During the seven years he worked on *The Prize*, Daniel Yergin may have imagined some sort of crisis in the oil-rich Middle East that would make his book a hot property when it was published. But even in his wildest reverie, Yergin could not have dreamed that publication of his oil saga would coincide with the greatest American military expedition since the Vietnam War.

But coincide it did. Five days after Yergin delivered his epilogue to Simon & Schuster, Saddam Hussein's troops invaded Kuwait. The publisher immediately embarked on a crash publishing schedule. In four months, or one-third the time it normally takes to publish a book, *The Prize* was in bookstores.

Critics of the war have pointed to a base motive behind American policy ever since George Bush uttered the words, "This will not stand." If Kuwait exported, say, artichokes instead of oil, the United States would have cared considerably less about the fate of the emirate. But readers of *The Prize* will recognize an enduring principle at stake. In our century, oil begets national wealth, which begets state power. Americans differed over whether the resort to force was premature or wise. But unless one had been a pacifist or considered Saddam Hussein a benign force, the case for doing nothing would have been hard to make. American inaction would have been as grievous a miscalculation as was its involvement in Vietnam. A nation's foreign policy is, after all, a matter of making distinctions.

But no one should conclude that Yergin's book lets the United States off the hook. Many of the loudest advocates of force had earliest dismissed the criticism, popular in the mid-1970s, that indiscriminate arms sales in the Persian Gulf would eventually come to haunt America. Yergin also reminds us that, even as US forces battled in the Middle East, Americans were consuming far more gasoline per capita, and paying far less for the privilege of doing so, than anyone else in the world.

Yergin, the author of *Shattered Peace* (1977) and *Energy Future* (1982), here sets himself his most ambitious task to date: nothing less than a history of petroleum, and all that oil has achieved and despoiled since its modern discovery in the Pennsylvania hills.

The word *modern* is significant because black ooze seeping up through the ground has been used since at least 3000 B.C., mostly as a medical nostrum. But the Industrial Revolution found new and ever more uses for petroleum – beginning with artificial lighting – until oil has become the key ingredient that makes modern society work.

At the outset, Yergin announces the three themes that he will explore in *The Prize*. These are the ways petroleum has been perceived in this century: first as a business, then as a strategic resource, and finally as a factor affecting the environment.

Oil became a big business and fortunes were made almost from the day that first Pennsylvania well hit pay dirt in 1859. Speculators in one early well earned \$15,000 in profit for every dollar they invested. By the 20th century oil had become the world's biggest business, virtually inextricable from modern capitalism, multinational enterprise, the international economy, and business-government relations. Seven of today's top 20 Fortune 500 companies are oil conglomerates.

World War I, with its new petroleum-powered fleets and tanks, transformed oil from merely a commodity that generated immense wealth into an essential resource for nation-states. A young Winston Churchill was among the first to realize that strategic mastery itself was the prize conferred by control over oil. Churchill's insight sounds the second theme of *The Prize*, in which Yergin correlates national power with control of oil resources. Oil-rich Iraq seems to prove this proposition: With a population of only 17 million, Iraq was able to support the fourth largest military force in the world. Yergin also reminds the reader how much American power is oil power. After World War II, in crises extending from the Korean War to the Six Day War in 1967, America's capacity to maintain its oil supply through international production and its ability to guarantee the international transport of oil to its allies played a major role in cementing the Western alliance under US leadership.

Yergin makes this argument correlating oil and power persuasive, perhaps too persuasive, because he fails to treat what seem significant exceptions. His thesis does not explain, for example, why the Soviet Union, the world's largest oil-producing country, has failed economically, or why Germany and Japan were able to become great powers without oil resources. (It can be argued of Japan and Germany, however, that their defeat in World War II was in no small part due to oil shortages).

The struggle for control of oil has created, paradoxically, an environment out of control: The follies and shortsightedness of Hydrocarbon Man is Yergin's final theme. From global warming to the pollution and congestion in cities from Mexico City to Eastern Europe, oil has contributed to conditions of life that threaten human health, endanger other species, and possibly imperil the planet. Yergin's look at the high-energy way of life is, in many respects, the most sobering aspect of the entire book. What emerges, after putting aside all the struggles for individual, corporate, or national wealth and power, is an unflattering picture of human incapacity to manage a non-renewable resource with even a modicum of enlightenment.

With such themes, and cast of characters ranging from John D. Rockefeller to the shah of Iran, Yergin could hardly have produced a dry, lifeless book. Yet for all its detail, *The Prize* leaves several important threads dangling, never fully exploring what the oil saga tells us about the business-state relationships, or the mix of oil money with politics. It is only after 100 pages of discussion that the reader is informed, almost incidentally, that John D. Rockefeller's great success as an oilman depended in no small part on Standard Oil's ability to pass and block legislation.

Yergin's narrative becomes more politically oriented when it comes to the Depression. He shows why the Roosevelt administration agreed to ration production and keep oil prices at or above \$1 per barrel during the 1930s. Grateful oilmen responded by becoming the only major industrialists to back the Democrats. Even if, eventually, more dollars from oil flowed to the Republican Party, the Democrats continued to receive competitive contributions. (Certainly virtually no other industry was as generous to the Democratic Party in the period from the 1930s to the '60s.) Oklahoma and Texas campaign contributions were a financial pillar of the New Deal coalition. They made the infamous oil-depletion allowance politically invincible. Yet even here Yergin expends more words on petroleum's contribution to the rise of the motel than in explaining this stunning tax break.

Even when Yergin seems ready to get down to business, he often drops the ball. He devotes deserved space to one of the most revealing episodes in the entire post-war era: that struggle which began in 1951 when Iran's new prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, nationalized British oil holdings. After a British-imposed embargo failed to deter Mossadegh, the US Central Intelligence Agency sponsored a coup in 1953 that overthrew him and placed the shah in power. The previous year, when Truman had sent Averell Harriman to negotiate with Mossadegh, the prime minister had claimed he could not compromise because of the power of Ayatollah Seyed Kashani. Harriman had then sought out Kashani, only to be told – in words that anticipate a later ayatollah – that all foreigners were evil, and foreigners interested in oil were candidates for butchering. Yergin fails to do justice to the lawyer and democrat Mossadegh, who quite legitimately wanted Iran to have control of its own resources. Mossadegh is portrayed here as something of an unreliable clown, irrational in his obstinacy.

The ramifications of Mossadegh's defeat still resound today. The coup, its supporters say, brought 25 years of stability in Iran and provided America a key ally in the Cold War. But others note the irony with which this episode has come full circle: American opposition to Mossadegh ushered in the regime of the shah; internal Iranian opposition to the shah eventually brought about the theocracy of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The United States, to oppose Khomeini's Iran, supported and built up Saddam Hussein during the 1980s – and the rest is history. Ironies and tragic elements abound in the all-too-human struggle over petroleum and all it confers, but too often they are missing from Yergin's account.

Some early readers criticized *The Prize*, feeling that Yergin had ascribed too much significance to oil, inflating its importance in events big and small. In fact, his opus omits

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too much of the real history. One is left with the sense that, while *The Prize* sketches the outlines of the complex tale, neither Yergin nor anyone else has completely mastered this epic drama.