USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics. Vol. 3 No. 1S (2020)
ISSN 2611-2752

Natural Resources, Modernity, and Security in the Progressive Era

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Published: November 10, 2020

Abstract

The essay focuses on the entanglement of natural resources, progress, and security in the United States. It argues that Progressive Era politics and culture were crucial for the process of securitization of raw materials and that geologists and natural scientists working for the Department of the Interior were the first to grasp the transformations imposed by the use of oil, thus making the case for the "control" of supply. The essay also introduces a research agenda for a project that looks at American power's environmental and human health implications by investigating oil pollution in water in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: Oil; Progressive Era; Modernity; National Security; Environment; Department of Interior.

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Gaetano Di Tommaso holds a double Ph.D. degree in history from the University of Bologna (Italy) and Sciences Po-Paris (France) and specializes in U.S. energy policy and security. He held grants and fellowships from Brown University, Northwestern University, and the Kluge Center at the U.S Library of Congress and has been working as a teacher at Sciences Po-Paris (Reims campus). He's currently a short-term research fellow at the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies (Netherlands).

My broader research interest lies at the intersection of natural resources and American statecraft. In exploring their interaction, my work maintains a strong focus on social and cultural factors, looking at what informed the public's understanding of minerals and raw materials, shaped their political use, and determined their collective value. I have worked on these issues primarily in the context of the Progressive Era, analyzing the process of securitization of raw materials, particularly those used as an energy source. I have delved, more specifically, into early twentieth century American culture and politics to investigate how oil became a vital asset to the country's progress and security and eventually turned into the quintessential symbol of modernity. In doing so, I also aim to offer an innovative perspective on the importance of those decades as the springboard for the long American century.

1 Petropolitics

I argue that geologists and natural scientists working for the Department of the Interior (DOI) built on conservationist ideals and the contemporary theory of public interest to forge the connection between fossil fuel supply, the country's safety, and the progress and well-being of American society. Instead of navy officials or service members, DOI experts were those who expanded the traditional notion of national defense, making a case for the national "control" of specific natural resources. In doing so, they transformed Washington's concern and management of raw materials — oil, in particular — locking the federal government into a long-term strategy of intervention and bringing about a new situational awareness in the country.

A small group of federal administrators and professionals took up the mission of instructing the country about the importance of liquid fuel and petrochemicals while warning against the risks of an ever-increasing dependence. In short, they acted as self-appointed harbingers and guardians of the momentous technological, political, and cultural transformation associated with the materialization of an oil-fueled future — a "petro-modernity" that was already taking shape in the U.S. in the 1900s.

The process had permanent effects on U.S. politics, leading to the emergence of an unrefined, but compelling notion of energy security compatible with and actually supporting the idea of the U.S. as an emerging world-class power. Even more important, it brought about an early conceptualization of national security as an all-encompassing approach to defense — as the protection of American territorial integrity, society, and, in fact, civilization, through the organization and mobilization of the federal government's resources.

The DOI operated in those years with an "intermestic" horizon, contributing to the development of a new security ethos defined around the country's domestic needs and global ambitions. By shifting the primary site of agency from admirals and strategists to geologists and natural scientists, it is also possible to bridge the gap between different historiographical interpretations. On the one hand, there are the scholars who discount the utility, outside the context of the semi-permanent mobilization of American society that began in the 1940s, of a conceptual framework defined by the vocabulary and imaginary of national security; on the other, those stressing the role that a raw material like oil had in forging the modern American nation.

2 Some Key Methodological and Historiographical Aspects

Petroleum's pervasiveness and popularity as a raw material led to an accumulation of a vast amount of knowledge on its history as an energy source and the countless ways in which it interacts with politics and society. Historians have dissected the growth and development of the petroleum industry — just as they did with Washington's oil policy, a subject that has repeatedly attracted the interest of the general public.[1] The connection between oil and foreign policy has, in particular, been pointed out

1. The literature on oil is immense. For a quick and recent survey, see the special issue "Oil in American History," *Journal of American History*, 1 (2012). The best-known work on the history of the oil industry remains Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

as a problematic and controversial one.[2] In this context, one of the most penetrating critiques of the undue influence that petroleum has had in American policymaking can be found in Robert Vitalis's latest book.[3] I am indebted to Vitalis and his broader research, which oriented mine over the years. His latest work, therefore, has various points of contact with my own, as it identifies some of the main constitutive elements of America's fixation with oil. Vitalis goes back to the same early decades of the twentieth century to outline the first arguments for promoting oil-controlling policies, which were based on fears of scarcity and aims of self-sufficiency, and then countered them with the reasoning of those who, already in the 1920s, initially opposed them. This is also, however, where his work starts diverging from mine.

Vitalis sets out to dismantle oil's "myth" and deflate petroleum's strategic status. Building on early criticism around the idea of "oil as power" and compounding it with the multiple assessments that, from the 1940s on, have refuted the inevitability of oil scarcity and the possibility of actually dictating the market in a global economy, he argues that petroleum has never been — and is not, in fact — a special raw material. In doing so, he aims at the real target: decades of muscular American (foreign) oil policy. He presents Washington's choices as based on hard-to-die misconceptions about the dynamics of the oil industry and therefore exposes them as misguided. While Vitalis's intention is to bring down a policy-making apparatus that, still today, supports Washington's controversial alliances and involvement in regions like the Middle East precisely because of oil, my goal is instead to build up the story of how those assumptions came into play, when and why they were originally created, and what defined them.

Through a granular analysis of the historical context, my work provides a detailed historical reconstruction of the period and a reminder of how political choices are contingent on society's own experiences and circumstances. It is only through proper (cultural) historicization, thereby underscoring the values and beliefs informing reality, that we can indeed make sense of the gap — in those many instances where the gap does exist — between perceptions of (in)security and modernity and the mechanisms governing the global oil industry. On the other hand, it is exactly in forcing the recognition of this time-bound specificity and, therefore, "uniqueness" that such an analysis of the Progressive Era can provide real insights into the resilience of what Roger Stern called the "oil scarcity ideology."[4] This kind of study, then, runs as a matter of fact against the "normalization" of oil. Instead of observing oil in empirical (economic, strategic) terms, detaching its materiality from the conceptual, subjective, and yet shared collective determinants of its nature, my analysis assigns value to the constructed significance of the raw material, which also informs its political understanding.

This attempt to create a more textured account of the relationship between petroleum and the birth of modern America is reflected in the methodological approach. This means emphasizing change in the way of thinking about particular issues and fundamental notions such as those of national security and progress — change in popular and institutional culture rather than the practical (successful or not) implementation of policies. It also means stressing a view of agency as a process, which recognizes a continuous interplay between values and strategic aims, technological progress and political leadership, economic incentives and institutional arrangements, and individual choices and "structural" elements in policymaking. In exploring the transformative power of petroleum as a natural resource, the study looks at the Progressive Era not as an inert chronological background, but as an active milieu of reform and a moment of international self-determination of the U.S. as a global power. It is exactly in connecting strategies of social and political reform with geopolitics that my research finds its most defining traits.

Most recently, researchers have moved to explore the impact that oil consumption has had on individuals, communities, and the socioeconomic system as a whole, showing how deeply it has seeped

2. For example, Andrew Price-Smith, *Oil, Illiberalism, and War: An Analysis of Energy and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015 and Micheal Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.

3. Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.

4. Roger J. Stern, "Oil Scarcity Ideology in U.S. Foreign Policy, 1908–97," *Security Studies* 2 (2016): 214-57.

into our daily habits and behaviors.[5] My study brings these analytical perspectives to bear, integrating and combining them with more classical accounts and traditional readings from primary sources. In addition to exploring oil production and consumption patterns, and discussing the transition toward a high-carbon society, my work engages with several broader themes in U.S. history, such as the continuous strengthening of federal authority, imperial expansion, and the nature of Progressive Era reforms. Historians have looked into the specific features of those early 20th century decades, including Theodore Roosevelt's role in the long trajectory of American ascendancy and the transformation of American society.[6] My analysis builds on, for example, the already-established connection between the conservation movement that developed at the turn of the century under T.R.'s leadership and the idea of resource scarcity.[7] In fact, it pushes the linkage further, tracing the conceptualization of the notion of energy security – intended as a function of price and long-term availability of petroleum – back to the conservation movement that materialized at the end of the nineteenth century and the "reformational awakening" of the Progressive Era.

The study also taps into the scholarship on national security, which is equally abundant, and inevitably focuses on the post-WWII world.[8] Various scholars have actually discussed themes such as energy security and national security in the specific context of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and some have looked at the particular role the DOI had in buttressing and sometimes even leading the American rise to globalism. The most recent and notable examples of this kind of analysis are by Peter Shulman and Megan A. Black.[9] Shulman's book mobilizes the concepts of "energy security" and "national security," but it does not really operationalize these notions. Indeed, it uses them to describe and account for a wide (and different) range of situations and policies connected, from the mid-19th century on, to fossil fuels, i.e., coal *and* oil. The hydrocarbon reliance era did open up almost two centuries ago with the advent of coal, as Shulman indicates. However, the depletion of America's coal reserves never presented itself as a serious prospect and even less so as an approaching existential threat. By overlooking the distinction, his narrative and historical analysis end up flattening oil's revolutionary impact. Black rightly identifies the DOI as a driving force behind the American advance and power projection. However, she puts minimal emphasis on the DOI officials' efforts to transform Washington's understanding and management of natural resources in the very early 20th century. In fact, she postdates the emergence of such a DOI's interest and activism.

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5. See, for example, Stephanie LeMenager, *Living oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013; Ross Barrett, Daniel Worden (eds.), *Oil Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, Imre Szeman (eds.), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2017; Matthew Huber's *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013; Lisa Margonelli, *Oil on the Brain: Adventures from the Pump to the Pipeline*. New York: Broadway Books, 2008; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2013; Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016; Bob Johnson, *Carbon Nation: Fossil Fuels in the Making of American Culture*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017; Thor Hogan, *Hydrocarbon Nation: How Energy Security Made Our Nation Great and Climate Security Will Save Us*. Baltimore: JHU Press, 2018; Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America*. New York: Basic 2019. Roger and Diana Olien, *Oil and ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 did discuss how Americans perceived the petroleum business. However, their analysis focuses on the brand image that American companies had at home. They did not link industrial or policy trajectories to broader patterns in American culture and society. Instead, they presented the efforts made to direct and respond to public perception from the industry's perspective.

6. For example, see John M. Thompson, *Great Power Rising: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. More broadly, on the Progressive Era: Christopher McKnight Nichols, Nancy C. Unger, *A Companion to the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

7. Ian Tyrrell, *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

8. The scholarship on national security is no less extensive than that of oil. Two recent examples, among many: Andrew J. Bacevich, ed., *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

9. Peter Shulman, *Coal and Empire: The Birth of Energy Security in Industrial America*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015; Megan A. Black, *Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

3 A Closer Look

At the turn of the century, a series of powerful reformist tendencies that had been developing under the large banner of progressivism engulfed the country and combined with broader technological transformations occurring inside and outside the United States. The rise of professionalism, the search for "efficiency" in industry as well as public service, the fight against corruption, and the renewed attention to social issues led to the emergence of authoritative scientific figures, i.e. technocrats or "experts" who gained increasing prominence in the public debate. Equally important was the formulation of a compelling idea of "common good" — one that emphasized the well-being of the national community as a whole instead of the individual and individualistic interests of the people and deemed federal intervention as useful, if not necessary, for achieving and protecting the general welfare. Meanwhile, the "closing" of the continental frontier and the late nineteenth-century imperial drive led to a further expansion of American political horizons. As it jockeyed to gain a seat at the great powers' table, Washington had to increase the country's military operational capabilities to match its new ambitions and meet the requirements of its new role in the international arena.

Oil was an integral part of all these processes. When it did not fuel them directly, petroleum lubricated or outfitted them. The transformation of the DOI into a major policy actor exemplifies this development. The Department's mission, which originally consisted of "disposing of" public lands, shifted in those years toward a form of "utilitarian conservationism" that aimed at locating, surveying, and preserving those "mineral products necessary to meet the requirements of twentieth-century civilization."[10] In this context, the DOI's geologists soon identified petroleum as a critical resource, produced the first estimates of American reserves, and built a powerful message around the latter's supposed impending exhaustion. The attention that was given to oil served a twofold purpose. At the interdepartmental level, the DOI used oil as leverage to carve space for its own agencies and gain administrative weight in Washington vis-à-vis other departments. As a "mineral" resource, petroleum regulations technically fell under the DOI's jurisdiction. The Department's officials used the growing emphasis on oil, which they themselves largely encouraged, to achieve a more authoritative position and increase their capacity. At the national (and international) level, the DOI used oil's industrial value to expand federal authority and force a change in Washington's role with regard to natural resources. It fostered a transition from oversight to supervision (if not actual management), and did so by promoting federal involvement and intervention — firstly at home and abroad soon after — to ensure a supply to American society.

Oil was neither the only raw material being surveyed by the DOI nor the only one to be considered crucial for industrial development. What made petroleum different from them was the narrative that, already in the early 20th century, surrounded it as a liquid fuel, lubricant, and petrochemical feedstock. Oil took on a life of its own in public discourse and popular imagination. Petroleum's versatility, transportability, and energy density influenced how people moved and lived. Americans went from knowing only one petroleum cut — kerosene, which was used as an alternative to whale oil to fuel lamps — to making oil an irreplaceable part of their lives in the form of dozens of byproducts and distillates, including cosmetics and health-care essentials. The continuous creation and marketization of new derivative products allowed oil to permeate society and, ultimately, to gain an unmatched symbolic value as the material building block of contemporary civilization. This process was exclusive to oil. Its metamorphic nature turned it into a sort of supernatural entity, removed from and placed above other raw materials like tin, coal, or rubber, which came also to be seen as necessary in advanced industrialized society.

The lore built around oil did not affect only the policymaking process. Another underlying theme of the research is how the experience of petroleum profoundly shaped the constitution of modern subjectivity. Indeed, petroleum products did not simply set the material conditions for modernity; they also framed its cultural dimension. The new forms of mobility that were made available, for example, offered a promise of personal liberation that revitalized typical American ideals and values, such as freedom, rugged individualism, and opportunity, linking their visualization and interpretation

10. George Otis Smith, *Our Mineral Reserves—How to Make America Industrially Independent*, No. 599. Washington: GPO, 1914.

to the global system of oil extraction and consumption that had already reached a developed stage by the late 1910s.[11]

Oil was neither just another mineral nor energy source because it changed people's — and nations' — relationships to space and time. It generated its own chronotopes in literature and public discourse and influenced key social institutions' perception of the possibilities presented by the spatial, geographic, and geopolitical context. It exacerbated the fears of vulnerability and dependence produced by the brand of environmental determinism popular at the turn of the century. At the same time, it offered a way to transcend those fears, suggesting the possibility of overcoming many of the practical obstacles that had limited the potential of individuals and states until then.

This is the context in which DOI's officials managed to give shape and substance to a new, expanded notion of national security, mobilizing other departments, including the State Department, as well as Congress and asking them to protect petroleum resources at home from external encroachment while extending U.S. authority ("national control") over those abroad. The intellectual grounds on which they built their position and policy proposals combined a competitive, zero-sum vision of international relations with a clear sensitivity about petroleum's strategic and "civilizational" value. In addition to supporting a more robust defense apparatus, oil was necessary to power a specific form of socio-economic organization — an advanced industrial (capitalist) society, which corresponded to a project, a vision of what life in the United States should look like. Having a continuous supply of oil would have also allowed the country to maintain the international standing it aspired to gain abroad. Policies aimed at securing this continuous availability at home and abroad, which in many cases translated into sweeping support for national oil companies, served (and would have continued to serve) a successful narrative about what the country had achieved, what it was supposedly entitled to, and what lay ahead. At the time, the background was that of an increasingly antagonistic international environment where imperial principles of hierarchy and power still dominated. Yet, the idea of the United States as a regional and possibly global provider of petroleum was not lost to DOI's officials, as they envisioned the country as being able to deliver fuel oil "not only to her own ships but to the ships of the world at any port at which they may call. No matter what our international arrangements may be."[12]

Therefore, the possessive approach to raw materials and oil that the DOI developed during the Progressive Era was not simply due to imprecise, hastened, or misguided scientific evaluations foreseeing the exhaustion of American reserves, or the result of a momentary panic caused by exceptional circumstances (like WWI). Rather, it was the organic outcome of a system of thought that regarded the United States as a heavyweight in a competitive international arena and perceived the lack of exclusive possession of specific natural resources as a threat to the national community and its values more than merely a strategic disadvantage.

Access to oil, just like the condition of "scarcity," has to be understood as a social and spatial concept rather than a geological fact determined by scientific calculations. It rested on a *relational* view of natural resources, a perspective that had — and still has — inherent (geo)political implications. More than reporting numbers and figures about the country's oil situation, DOI's officials "produced" assessments that rested on a specific and highly ideological vision of the reality on the ground and the relations among nations.

4 Troubled Waters

Oil's role in U.S. history can be viewed not only by analyzing how it directly transformed American society and politics, but also by looking at its interaction with other natural resources, especially one with which the interdependence is often overlooked but is, in fact, total —- water. The real depth of the relationship between oil and water becomes plainly visible once we consider how the oil industry functions. Tremendous amounts of water are required to operate oil wells and extract and refine oil,

11. On the relevance of this "petro-modern imaginary" see Mark Whalan, *World War One, American Literature, and the Federal State*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 156.

12. Mark Requa, "The Petroleum Problem of the World," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 30, 1920, 18.

making petroleum production and processing extremely water-intensive activities. Once processed, oil derivatives are tied to the global transportation network that moves them around the globe —- primarily on water. The thousands of giant oil tankers crisscrossing the oceans every day are a staple of today's world, just like the environmental disasters that go with petroleum's ever-increasing use. Water is also the best medium through which we can observe the negative consequences of oil extraction and consumption — oil spills, destruction of marine ecosystems through deep-water drilling, freshwater contamination due to petrochemical waste, and rising sea levels. The list of sites and instances in which oil and water do mix, regrettably due to human activity, is long and tragic. I am currently working toward a different but related project that aims to highlight the environmental and human health implications of American power precisely by exploring the interplay between oil and water, with a focus always on the early twentieth century. The underlying theme here is the analysis of the exploitative nature of the relationship between the country and its natural resources. Seas, oceans, and waterways in general have been natural vectors for expanding the American empire. They have all played a crucial role in its territorial redefinition, in its political consolidation, and even in amplifying its cultural dimension. Discourses of sea power have informed American naval policy and prompted the U.S. Navy and military to gain control over ports, fueling stations, and choke points worldwide since the late nineteenth century. The expansion of American sovereignty in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century entailed extending Washington's authority over land and water. Control over waterways and coastal areas became a fundamental element in first strengthening the "internal empire" and later projecting power outside the continental United States. The Supreme Court recognized the power of Congress to regulate navigable waterways as an extension of the Commerce Clause of the constitution as early as the 1820s. It was only at the turn of the century, however, that the federal government really started to act in this capacity by developing navigable streams and funding irrigation projects through the Reclamation Act. At the same time, Washington envisioned the creation of the over 1,000-mile-long Gulf Intracoastal Waterway between Florida and Texas, a system of water routes that would prove invaluable for transport and supply during both peace and wartime. In 1914, the opening of the Panama Canal served as evidence and further advancement of this national policy of water domination.

This network of channels and canals connecting the country's interior to its outer territories and the world was crucial in moving goods and providing drainage, irrigation, water supply, and power generation. More succinctly, it supported American commerce and economy in the critical period of the United States' ascendancy as a global power. The U.S. "floated" to global dominance, boosted by industries — primarily the extractive business — that drew extensively from its waterways. And this represents the other side of the coin indeed: as the federal government took control of the country's rivers and streams, it struggled to safeguard their quality and public health. The movement towards centralization in waterways control and regulation between the 1870s and 1930s was not matched by a parallel effort promoting rules to prevent industrial waste and pollution. While the creation and modification of waterways became a national issue, the contamination of water bodies remained a matter delegated to individual states or even left in the industry's hands. Indeed, despite a series of public health crises in American cities, the federal government did not really step in until the late 1940s to promote nationwide standards. Environmental protection and sanitation were indeed among the areas most adversely affected by the unregulated growth of the extractive industry and quick industrialization — or, to put it differently, they represent the domains in which the local ramifications of the entanglement of power and oil became most visible and long-lasting. The outcome — dangerously high levels of water pollution — was especially concentrated in certain regions, like the tract of coast stretching from New Orleans to Beaumont, TX, today one of the most toxic on the continent, and the Gulf of Mexico itself. The very businesses that propelled America's growth since the early twentieth century were, therefore, the ones that slowly poisoned its waters, leaving a devastating legacy.

The project thus explores the tension between, on the one hand, federal control and capture of water bodies in the process of territorial and political aggrandizement and, on the other, their commercial use and abuse in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is in the unusual juxtaposition of national power and (lack of) sanitation that the study finds its focus. Connecting these two aspects is indeed a dynamic of economic exploitation, along with its well-known corollary of environmental

degradation. In the middle, pressed by Washington's expansionist outlook and a cherished vision of growth, stood the American people.

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