

[Wight on Wolfe-Hunnicut, 'The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq'](#)

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Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut. *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq*. Stanford Studies in Middle Eastern and Islamic Societies and Cultures Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 332 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5036-1382-9; \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-5036-2791-8.

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In the minds of most Americans, the history of Iraqi-US relations likely begins with the 1991 Gulf War or perhaps the US role in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988. In *The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy: Oil and Arab Nationalism in Iraq*, Brandon Wolfe-Hunnicut provides an important historical account of an earlier era in the interactions between Iraq and the United States. Using US state records, private corporate archives, memoirs by and interviews of Iraqi leaders, and substantial secondary literature in both US and Iraqi history, Wolfe-Hunnicut chronicles the struggle between Iraq and the United States over the former's efforts to nationalize the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), a consortium of Western multinational oil companies (including the US firms Exxon and Mobil), during the period from the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 to the completion of Iraq's acquisition of the IPC in 1973.

Wolfe-Hunnicut argues in the introduction that the book contributes to "three broad fields of knowledge" (p. 5). In the realm of international political economy, he critiques the myth of oil scarcity as justification for Western control of energy resources in the Global South. On the history of Iraq, he expands our knowledge of Iraqi efforts to gain control over their most important natural resource export. In the field of US diplomatic history, he analyzes US policy toward Iraq within the framework of the Wisconsin school pioneered by the historian William A. Williams.

Building on arguments presented by scholars like Timothy Mitchell and Robert Vitalis, Wolfe-Hunnicut provides additional evidence to counter the claims of the IPC and others that Western control over foreign oil was necessary to ensure that scarce petroleum would be reliably supplied to the United States and its allies.[1] The book records numerous occasions where the IPC intentionally limited the output of Iraqi oil to maintain higher global prices or to protect the IPC's power over Iraq, whereas all Iraqi governments, regardless of political orientation, sought to increase oil exports.

Arguably the greatest contribution of the book is the documentation and analysis of what Wolfe-Hunnicut terms "the Al-Haseeb group," a collection of Iraqi reformers and nationalists, including one-time governor of the Central Bank of Iraq, Khair el-Din Haseeb, who developed the intellectual and political structures that ultimately enabled the nationalization of the IPC (p. 6). Refusing to let

these Iraqi reformers languish in obscurity, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt places them at the center of his account, which is especially enriched by his interviews with Haseeb. In charting the efforts of these Iraqi leaders, the book demonstrates not only how Iraqis overcame powerful Western entities to advance the sovereignty and economic well-being of their country but also how they articulated a vision of Iraq as a multinational social democracy. In doing so, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt challenges common caricatures of Iraqi politics as one of only violent and sectarian impulses by highlighting its traditions of liberalism and humanism.

In looking at the struggle between the IPC and Iraqi nationalists, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt analyzes the outsized role of a third party that sought to mediate between the two: the US government. It is in looking at Washington that the book draws on the insights of Williams to understand why successive US presidential administrations and bureaucrats worked on behalf of the IPC to the detriment of Iraq. As convincingly presented by Wolfe-Hunnicuttt, much of the history of US relations with Iraq serves as a case study of Williams's arguments that Americans have historically tended to believe that US domestic well-being depended on US economic dominance over other countries, leading Americans to blame any US domestic problems on foreigners who resisted US economic diktats, which led Americans in turn to a "kind of externalizing [of] evil [that] serves not only to antagonize the outsiders, but further intensifies the American determination to make them over in the proper manner or simply push them out of the way." [2] Wolfe-Hunnicuttt takes care to demonstrate that the US government was never a monolithic entity but rather a terrain contested by a variety of interest groups, including the IPC, cold warriors, modernization theorists, the US domestic oil industry, and the Israel lobby. But he also shows that many US officials recurrently expressed fears that the efforts of Iraqi leaders to weaken US control over Iraqi oil would harm the US economy and the US geopolitical position in the Cold War and therefore worked to undermine or even liquidate Iraqi reformers. These US officials were particularly influential under the Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy administrations, and they crafted policies that needlessly poisoned Iraqi-US relations and harmed the moral standing of the US government. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt could have very well titled his book "The Tragedy of American Diplomacy in Iraq" in homage to Williams's work.

For the actual title of his book, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt instead drew inspiration from Richard Hofstadter's seminal article, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." [3] Paranoia and intrigue are recurrent themes throughout Wolfe-Hunnicuttt's book. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt regularly describes, with justification, US leaders as falling into the paranoid style of conspiratorial fantasy in their thinking about Iraqi leaders. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles is a prime example: his unshakable yet baseless belief that the Soviets were controlling events in Iraq led Dulles to completely misread the situation in that country and misguidedly pursue phantoms. In analyzing various coup and assassination plots against Iraqis, however, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt embraces the mantra that just because you are paranoid does not mean they are not after you, the "they" being Americans. The book covers numerous plots against various Iraqi governments and officials and weighs the evidence for US involvement in them. Wolfe-Hunnicuttt reliably argues the weight of evidence points to a US role in each case, even if not definitively. He is transparent about the available records and his analysis of them, and while some readers might seek a higher burden of proof in linking the United States to individual conspiracies, Wolfe-Hunnicuttt leaves little doubt that there were many Americans, in both the IPC and the US government, who worked to undermine the position of Iraq's reformers.

The tendency of US leaders to work against, rather than to support, Iraqis such as those in the Al-

Haseeb group that sought Iraqi control over Iraqi oil proves to be both misguided and tragic. It was misguided because the IPC was not necessary, and indeed was sometimes even a hindrance, to the flow of Iraqi oil to the West. It was tragic because US machinations contributed significantly to the dysfunction and violence within Iraqi politics that prevented the establishment of a pluralistic and egalitarian democracy in Iraq as pursued by the reformers, and instead established the conditions for the Baath Party to seize power in 1968. Saddam Hussein would thus be the beneficiary of the groundwork laid by the reformers to nationalize the IPC, and he would use the massive increase in Iraq's petrodollars revenues during the 1970s to develop a coup-proof authoritarian state and a massive military. Hussein would then invade Iran in 1980, setting off a ripple effect of successive wars that would include the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and various Middle East conflicts and US military actions that persist to the present, bringing unspeakable misery to millions of people.

The Paranoid Style in American Diplomacy is an important work within the growing body of scholarship that provides equal attention to both sides of the relationship between the Arab world and the United States. The book will be required reading for those who seek to understand the history of Iraqi-US relations, as well as be of interest more broadly to those studying the political economy of oil, US empire, and decolonization.

Notes

[1]. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011); and Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

[2]. William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 50th anniversary ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 15.

[3]. Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1, 1964, 77-86.

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