Aramco's World: The Construction of Petro-Cultural Hegemony, 1944-1973

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Master's Thesis: Applied History

24th June 2024

Abstract:

In 1933, Standard Oil of California (Socal) purchased the exclusive concession for the extraction of Saudi Arabian oil, through the subsidiary California-Arabian Standard Oil (Casoc). After a decade marked by initial exploration difficulties and World War II disruptions, Casoc rebranded to Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) in 1944. By 1948, the Aramco ownership comprised four of the seven major oil firms (colloquially known as the Seven Sisters) that dominated world oil - Standard Oil of New Jersey, Socony Vacuum, Texaco, and Socal. This increased ownership reflected a massive expansion in Aramco's operations which, underpinned by soaring global demand, saw Aramco become the largest producer in the Middle East by the early 1950s.

This thesis investigates the sophisticated array of public relations strategies that Aramco employed to maintain its burgeoning position as one of the largest and most lucrative oil operations in the world before the company's eventual nationalisation by the Saudi Arabian government beginning in 1973. Such strategies were reflective of evolving methods of shaping discourse and narrative through cultural production, which were becoming increasingly common as the twentieth century wore on. This analysis focuses on three prominent themes of Aramco's public relations strategies: exceptionalism, development and modernization, and relationship management with the Saudi monarchy and labour force.

1. Aramco constructed a distinct cultural identity of exceptionalism, in part by appropriating pre-existing narratives of American exceptionalism, portraying itself as an enlightened and mission-driven entity. The company sought to entrench this corporate identity within American and Saudi cultural imaginaries, in order to distinguish themselves from accusations of imperialism and exploitation.
2. Aramco's public relations output also heavily focused on the themes of development and modernization, positioning the company as a partner in growth. This narrative was also articulated within the broader context of American developmentalism, ubiquitous during the cold war period. Aramco's development posture emphasized technological superiority and the transformative effect of western modernity, which they represented, on Saudi Arabia. These depictions served to dramatize Aramco's role as a catalyst for Saudi progress, fostering a sense of technological paternalism.
3. Aramco crafted a positive image of the Saudi monarchy, particularly through the valorised depiction of Saudi Arabia's founding monarch, King Ibn Saud. Aditionally, the company sought to construct an internal corporate culture to influence its American employees, and by extension its Saudi labour force, attempting to shape a perspective aligned with that which the company sought to inculcate in its workforce. In doing so they sought to mitigate political and industrial opposition within the kingdom.

Overall, this thesis provides insight into the strategies of cultural production that underpinned Aramco's attempts to maintain control over Saudi oil resources, highlighting the enduring relevance of these tactics in contemporary global energy dynamics. Understanding the construction of these cultural narratives is crucial as ever, as the world grapples with continuing oil dependency.

Key Words: Aramco, Oil, Public Relations, Saudi Arabia, Exceptionalism, Development, Modernity, Corporate Culture, Multinational, Frontier.

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Introduction

In 1933, Standard Oil of California (Socal) purchased the exclusive concession for the extraction of Saudi Arabian oil, under the subsidiary California-Arabian Standard Oil (Casoc).[1] After a fairly low-key first decade of existence, largely due to initial difficulties in locating viable wells and the considerable disruption caused by the Second World War, the name and nature of the venture was completely changed. In 1944, Casoc was renamed as the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco).[2] Four years later, Standard Oil of New Jersey and Socony Vacuum both bought significant shares in the venture, to match those already purchased by The Texas Company (Texaco).[3] Aramco was now owned by four of the seven major oil firms, commonly referred to as the 'Seven Sisters', that dominated the global oil industry in this period.

Spurred by the 'miraculous' post-war economic recoveries in Western Europe and Japan, as well as widespread conversion to oil-based economies, the global demand for oil skyrocketed. The Middle East emerged as the primary centre of production to meet the new levels of demand, and Aramco was the largest single producer in the region. Yet the position occupied by Aramco, and other foreign firms, in the Middle East was far from secure. In its pursuit of profit, Aramco had to navigate the respective interests of the governments of its global consumer base, its 'partners' in the Saudi ruling class, and (nominally) the Saudi workers that comprised the majority of its workforce in the kingdom. Eventually, the Saudi state would nationalise Aramco in an incremental acquisition process between 1973 and 1976.[4] Yet over the course of the preceding decades, despite the prospect of increasing 'Saudization' and diminished control and profit share being a real and present threat, Aramco had already amassed massive profits through the sale of Saudi oil. To maintain this grip on the immense wealth that flowed from beneath the Saudi Arabian ground, and the company's position within the global economy and geo-political arena in the lengthy period before nationalisation, the firm utilized one of the most complex and extensive programmes of 'public relations' output ever undertaken by a private entity.

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[1] Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 392-393.
[2] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 115.
[3] Yergin, *The Prize,* 396-97.
[4] Yergin, *The Prize,* 615-19.

Research Focus:

This thesis shall investigate the company's prodigious efforts in the production of narrative, discourse, and imagery; inherent in the practice of what, at this time, was becoming the increasingly prominent field of public relations, although, the phrase corporate propaganda is equally fitting. Ultimately, it shall seek to examine how such strategies were employed by Aramco to shape and alter perceptions of the company and its operations in Saudi Arabia, in pursuit of its corporate objectives.

In so doing, we shall first explore how Aramco created a distinct institutional identity for itself formulated around narratives of exceptionalism. Subsequently, we shall examine how Aramco employed the themes of development and modernization within its public relations materials in order to forge a legitimizing narrative of the company's historical and contemporary role in the kingdom. Finally, we shall turn to analyse how Aramco utilized public relations strategies to shape its relationship with the Saudi monarchy and with its labour force.

Societal and Academic relevance:

This study will provide a detailed and focused examination of the cultural narratives and assumptions with which this corporate behemoth sought to underpin its economic, and indeed geo-political project. Indeed, the Aramco case is a seminal one in the evolution of strategies for corporate control, in an industry with immense significance to the historical outcomes of the twentieth century, and (ultimately) to the future of our planet.

The private institutions that came to dominate the extraction and distribution of oil in the late nineteenth and twentieth century are still a prominent and entrenched aspect of global societies. Their hegemonic grip over the global energy economy, and the destruction they continue to wreak on the environments and populations of foreign sovereign nations, are still propped up by the same methods of narrative and image production that Aramco utilized to maintain their hold on Saudi Arabian oil. Throughout the last couple of decades for example, western oil giants operating in Africa have been trying to cultivate their cultural images as *partners* in development, in order to justify their exploitation of foreign country's natural resources, and the devastation of their natural environments. The reconstituted, nationalised oil operations of the Middle East now represent powerful Petro-states. which direct vast amounts of resources to influencing how they are perceived within the producer centres of the West by manipulating cultural narratives and imagery. The Aramco case offers insight into how such strategies emerged and crystalized in the operations of the firms active in the

Middle East throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century, Aramco foremost among them.

Historiography/ Literature Review

Broadly speaking, two of secondary literature have informed this thesis, and will be discussed in turn herein. First, there is a substantial body of traditional historiography examining the critical impact of oil interests and actors in shaping both the history of the region and wider geopolitical outcomes in the twentieth century. From the beginning, Aramco had an enormous influence on almost every facet of the rapidly developing Saudi state and played a decisive role in the geo-politics of the region. As we shall see, however, both the character of its influence inside the Kingdom and the degree to which the firm constituted a distinct, independent actor on the global stage is the subject of considerable scholarly debate.

Secondly, we shall examine the literature concerning pivotal developments in the strategies and methods employed by corporations in the age of modern mass media. This scholarship elucidates the ways in which, around the turn of the twentieth century, American companies began to utilize emergent techniques of modern public relations as means of socio-economic control.

Traditional Historiography on Aramco

Much of the body of historiography on Aramco was a product of an outpouring of scholarly attention in the 1970s and 1980s, unsurprisingly stimulated by the contemporary energy crises emanating from the region. This work predominantly constituted part of a broader intellectual drive to examine the involvement of foreign western powers, and the United States in particular, in the oil-dominated geopolitics of the Middle East throughout the 'American Century'. Such work set the broad terms of the historiographical debate over 'Americans, power and purpose' in the Gulf, which still persist today.[5] In this context, Robert Vitalis (the preeminent modern authority on the history of Saudi Oil), has cautioned that this 70s and 80s historiography was produced without access to the State Department and Foreign Office records utilized by more recent accounts.[6] As such, Vitalis goes on to suggest that the larger pool of source material, as well as the wider array of disciplinary approaches now available to prospective historical analyses of Aramco can aid in "areas of inquiry outside the

[5] Robert Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude: An Essay on American Exceptionalism, Hierarchy, and Hegemony in the Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 26, no.2 (2002), 189.
[6] Ibid.

traditional disciplinary boundaries of both diplomatic history and Americans' brand of comparative political economy", and can thus "serve to revise and deepen our appreciation" of the complex nature of American involvement in the Kingdom of Al Saud during the twentieth century.[7]

Relatedly, the desire to understand this 'American involvement' is in itself reflective of a predominant primary focus on state actors within studies of Middle Eastern oil history, tacitly subsuming the agency of American corporations active in the region into that of the US State. Indeed, Gregory Nowell observes that works on the diplomatic histories of the Middle East are naturally predisposed to "speak of how states use corporations rather than how corporations use states."[8] He argues that this was in no small part due to the fact that private firms are neither obliged, nor incentivised, to 'systematically preserve their political records the way nations do', thereby making it easier to confidently ascribe agency to states.[9] This privileging of state agency is certainly present within much of the historiography on Aramco; Douglas Little, for example, characterises the firm as simply an 'informal instrument' of American foreign policy in the region.[10] Whilst the weight of informed opinion seems to be clearly set against Little's reading of the firm's relationship with the State Department,[11] the majority of studies in this area have nonetheless analysed Aramco's historical role primarily in the context of studies primarily concerned with states; whether in the context of foreign policy outcomes or in predominantly comparative studies of Middle Eastern state formation and development. There are a couple of notable exceptions, however. Chad Parker has eschewed the typical preoccupation with state actors in studies of the prominent role of 'development' in twentieth century global history, to provide a focused account of how Aramco utilized development and modernization programmes in Saudi Arabia, in the pursuit of political and diplomatic objectives.[12] Moreover, Vitalis has written extensively on the unique historical character of the Aramco venture. His work has, more than that of any other scholar, illuminated the nature of the company's profound impact on

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[7] Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude," 187.
[8] Gregory Nowell. *Mercantile States and the World Oil Cartel, 1900-1939* (Ithaca: NY, 1994), 6.
[9] Nowell, *Mercantile States*, 6.
[10] Douglas Little, 'Gideon's Band: America and the Middle East since 1945,' *Diplomatic History* 18 (1994).
[11] Irvine Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia* (Princeton: New Jersey, 1981); David Painter, Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941–1954 (The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1986): Anderson and Painter, both highly influential in this field, instead describe the relationship as one of 'coalition' and 'partnership' respectively.
[12] Chad Parker, *Making the Desert Modern: Americans, Arabs, and Oil on the Saudi Frontier, 1933–1973* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015).

the history of the Middle East, and indeed upon broader global history in the century of oil. Indeed, the nexus of western oil firms, and their multitudinous subsidiary entities, was a defining feature of the post-war (and supposedly post-colonial) framework of Middle Eastern oil, and as such, of the development of twentieth century global history; Aramco perhaps foremost of this group, in terms of interest. Vitalis' and Parker's work notwithstanding, there is thus ample scope for new studies which take these private oil institutions, such as Aramco, as their explicit focus and examine their individual historic role in more detail. It is toward this end, that my own analysis shall be directed.

Finally, the body of scholarship which addresses the Aramco presence in Saudi Arabia prior to the nationalisation, is significantly divided upon the exact nature of the company's role in the kingdom. To some, Aramco undertook a cooperative, developmentalist approach in the kingdom which stood it in marked contrast the traditionally coercive and exploitative dynamics that had defined western involvement in the Middle East up to this point. Among the most notable scholars to have endorsed this characterisation of Aramco's operations to at least some degree, are Irvine Anderson, and Daniel Yergin, whose *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Powe*r is almost certainly the most-cited work in the historiography on oil geopolitics in the Middle East.[13]

This narrative, asserting the exceptionalism of the Aramco approach, is in keeping with a much broader historiographical trend in asserting American interventions in the global arena to be of a qualitatively distinct, uniquely progressive character.[14] Discussions of the multi-faceted concept of *American Exceptionalism* have become common place within American, and indeed global discourses in recent decades, and scholars such as Michael Adas, have contributed to a now extensive body of work seeking to analyse how pervasive notions of American exceptionalism have come to shape, and often distort historical narratives pertaining to the interventions of America's public and private institutions throughout the wider world.[15]

The extent to which the narrative of Aramco's exceptionalism, and its intersection with broader American exceptionalism, has shaped and distorted the historiography of Aramco is of profound significance to this study; not least because of the prominent role that the

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[13] Anderson, *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia*; Yergin, *The Prize.*
[14] Michael Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon: Integrating the Exceptionalist Narrative of the American Experience into World History," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 5 (2001): 1692-1720.
[15]Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon"; for a more comprehensive analysis of political, social and cultural applications of American exceptionalism see: Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996).

company itself had in the creation and perpetuation of such a narrative. Indeed, the means by which Aramco sought to curate its image of exceptionalism, along with a handful of other interrelated narratives pertaining to its Saudi operations constitutes the central focus of my analysis. As J.B. Kelly notes, Aramco's 'propaganda' programme extended to the subsidizing of various academic authors and institutions.[16] As such, "the Aramco version of Saudi Arabian history [was] firmly implanted not only in those American universities which offer programmes in Middle Eastern studies, but also in learned societies, philanthropic organisations and other institutions interested in the Middle East, such as the Middle East Institute in Washington".[17]

As we shall see, the shaping of academic culture and of intellectual discourses, pertaining to the history of Saudi Arabia, were one of the many forms of influence Aramco exerted over prevailing narratives relating to the company's' role in the history of Saudi Arabia. It is the nature of the company's strategies to exert such influence over collective perceptions that shall form the focus of this thesis.

Corporate Public Relations

The approaches adopted by the company in this regard, were consistent with a broader trend. This tangible strategic shift amongst American corporations specifically involved the development of increasingly sophisticated strategies for cultural and social influence employed by corporations. In examining the means by which Aramco sought to underpin its control of Saudi oil production, this study shall draw upon a body of literature which has sought to examine these strategic shifts and expose the profound and irrevocable socio-political impact wrought by the birth of modern public relations.

Stuart Ewan provides a historical overview of the emergence of modern public relations strategies and their application by state and private actors in the shaping of public perception and discourse, throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century and evolving through the course of the twentieth.[18] More specific to large-scale corporate entities, such as Aramco, Roland Marchland has similarly noted how an acute 'crisis of legitimacy', and the rise of a 'muckraking' culture, caused such corporations in the United States to institutionalise the

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[16] J. B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West* (New York, 1980).
[17] Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West,* 260.
[18] Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

practice of 'public relations' around the turn of the century.[19] Marchland asserts that, along with an increasingly complex array of corporate machinery to produce public relations content (content which he terms 'corporate imagery'), the markedly increased complexity of this imagery itself was a crucial development during this period.[20] This imagery, he argues, centred on the assertion of the 'values' and character of these corporate entities and was designed by the emergent class of American corporate behemoths, to "legitimize their newly amassed power within the nexus of social institutions."[21] Relatedly, David Nye notes that has noted these emergent corporate identities of the early twentieth century were not comprised of a singular cultural image, but rather represented the composite of several such images, each reflecting different intended audiences.[22] One important distinction in this context, was images projected to the wider public compared to images projected to the respective companies' own employees .[23] As we shall come to see throughout this analysis, Aramco's public relations strategies would certainly reflect this sophisticated awareness of audience, producing materials for different geographic and cultural publics, and for its own employees.

Scholars in this field also universally recognise the profound impact that the successive world wars had on the further evolution of corporate public relations, with the experience of total warfare establishing beyond doubt the potency of modern propaganda techniques The influence of the war effort on corporate strategy was profound and direct, providing an "important experiential element to business thinking about corporate imagery", with a large number of prominent corporate executives serving on the extensive array of wartime government agencies and boards.[24] The most influential in this context was undoubtedly the federal Committee for Public Information (CPI). In addition to countless corporate executives, the three most prominent figures in the professionalization of public relations, Ivy Lee, Carl Byoir and Edward Bernays, all served on the CPI during the war.[25]

Bernays particularly, is oft cited as the single most influential figure in the application of such strategies, successfully "situate[ing] himself as the most important theorist of

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[19] Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998)
[20] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul,* 3.
[21] Ibid.
[22] David E. Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Mass, 1985), 5.
[23] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul,* 44.
[24] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 90.
[25] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 89-90.

American public relations."[26] In 1947, he published an essay detailing the principles of the new public relations strategies that he had helped to establish.[27] Such strategies relied upon proven research from the social sciences, drawing upon the work of influential intellectuals such as Gustave le Bon, Walter Lippman and (Bernays' uncle by marriage) Sigmund Freud, which all sought to understand the workings of the 'group mind'.[28]

The use of emotive thematic and symbolic associations was integral to the practice of these emergent public relations strategies to control the collective perception. Such aspects were to be carefully crafted, in accordance with psychological and social scientific research, that would provoking emotive, rather than rationed response in the collective 'audience'.[29] In an infamous case study, discussed in his essay, Bernays orchestrated a 1928 campaign for the American Tobacco Company to increase cigarette sales amongst women, in which cigarettes were presented as 'torches of freedom'. The successful association of cigarettes with the suffragette movement, and the evocative themes of power and liberty drastically increased female smoking numbers in the United States.[30]

Ewen asserts that figures such as Bernays were fundamental in ensuring "the unfolding role of public relations within the modern architecture of power."[31] In his role self-styled role as 'counsel on public relations', Bernays, and other public relations practitioners that followed his example, aided in the application of such techniques to the self-image and rhetoric of politicians, and public and private institutions.[32] The central objective was to secure mass public approval which, Bernays observed, "in our present social organization…is essential to any large undertaking".[33]Bernays' termed this approach "the engineering of consent."[34]

The institutional composition of Aramco's corporate infrastructure in the period under investigation here clearly points to the relevance of these research-based methods, as well as

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[26] Ewen, *PR!,* 163.
[27] Edward Bernays, 'The Engineering of Consent'*, The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 250 (1947), 113-120.*

[28] Ewen, *PR!,*156-63*; See also: Regulating a New Society: Public Policy and Social Change in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: Mass, 1994).

[29] Bernays, "The Engineering of Consent*."*
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ewen, *PR!,167.*
[32] Ibid.
[33] Cited in Ewen, *PR!,* 166.
[34] Ibid; The terms was modelled on the earlier phrase 'the manufacture of consent', coined by Walter Lippman, who's thinking was a major influence on Bernays and other public relations practitioners.

the influence of states' wartime uses of propaganda. Indeed, Vitalis notes that the company's Arabian Affairs Division (AAD) was directly modelled on the Cairo branch of the Office of Strategic Services which had played a key role in American propaganda strategy during the Second World War. The AAD was staffed with trained researchers and was the central organ of Aramco's Middle Eastern public relations strategy and production until the company was nationalised by the Saudi government in the 1970s.[35] Moreover, the content of Aramco's public relations narratives revolved around a handful of highly evocative themes such as Exceptionalism, Modernization as well as powerful cultural symbols like *the frontier.* Such themes were continually applied to Aramco's cultural imagery by the company's public relations strategists in much the same way as Bernay's had affixed the theme of liberty to female smokers.

The studies cited above relate only to the domestic U.S context. Aramco, of course, was different, and its more geo-political function as the exclusive producers of Saudi oil likely explains why it went further than perhaps any of the other big US corporations in the complexity public relations output.

Research Gap

The following analysis shall thus seek to augment these two extant bodies of literature. First, this thesis shall contribute to the study of Aramco's position in wider American geo-political relations with Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, and narratives of American exceptionalism in this context. It shall do so by placing explicit focus on the company's self-representation and positioning within the contemporary and historical narratives, of US Saudi relations and beyond.

Secondly, this thesis shall conduct a detailed examination of the Aramco venture as a unique case study in the evolving strategies of corporate public relations in the twentieth century. The unique political entanglements of Aramco's commercial project, as the sole producer of a foreign countries most precious natural resource operating in cooperation with an autocratic monarchic state structure, make it a unique and illuminating case study for how such modes of corporate representation constituted sophisticated tools for maintaining power structures.

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[35] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 69.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This thesis shall not subscribe to a singular, overarching theoretical framework. There are, however, several conceptual elements that are of great utility in thinking about the topics broached in this thesis. These can provide inspiration and nuance to the ways in which we conceive of Aramco's efforts to buttress its power and influence in the Middle East and beyond. I shall briefly elaborate upon these in turn.

First, it is necessary to expand upon the notion of American exceptionalism discussed in the previous section. The concept is a long-standing and influential one, derived from the supposedly unique origins, historical development, political institutions, and cultural values of the United States. As alluded to in the previous section, the veracity of American exceptionalism in historical and socio-political analyses has been highly contested within academic discourse. However, it is clear that the various component nations of American exceptionalism carried significant cultural and political capital in the twentieth century. As we shall see, Aramco would draw heavily upon various component aspects of American exceptionalism throughout its public relations programme. In so doing, seeking to co-opt these culturally engrained conceptions within the construction of its own distinct, cultural image.

Second, inspiration has been drawn from Antonio Gramsci's concept of Cultural Hegemony, which seeks to theorise the importance of controlling the prevailing cultural discourses and narratives in maintaining the position of dominant groups within society, in the age of mass media. Cultural Hegemony theory asserts that through control of various modes of cultural production and influence, these groups can shape the values, norms, and assumptions inherent in the dominant culture. Through such means are the perceptions and actions of 'the masses' manipulated, shaping the "common sense that they use to make sense of the world".[36] This 'common sense' thus serves to legitimize the privileged position of dominant groups within society; soliciting what Gramsci describes as "the 'spontaneous' consent" of the masses, by virtue of such groups' "position and function in the world of production."[37]

The ironic invocation of 'spontaneous' consent draws an interesting (if unconscious) connection to Bernays' 'engineering of consent' detailed in the previous section of this

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[36] Antonio Gramsci, *the Prison Notebooks*.
[37] Antonio Gramsci, the Prison Notebooks, Notebook 3, §12,

analysis. This commonality in terms alludes to the logical affinity of Gramsci's theory, with the aspirations of public relations strategies and their socio-political applications, being employed with increasing regularity by powerful social entities in the first half of the twentieth century. Added salience of Gramsci's theory to the context of this analysis, is lent by the importance he places in the role of intellectuals and education, in the propagation of cultural hegemony. Aramco would place significant emphasis on acquiring the influence of intellectuals, and upon the production of educational materials, as part of its public relations programme during the period under investigation.

Whilst Gramsi's cultural hegemony theory traditionally postulates a homogenous ruling class, the small cartel of oil multinationals that dominated global oil in this period (four of which comprised Aramco's ownership), was an incredibly powerful group within the global economy and global societies; much as the collective 'oil lobby' remains in modern day. In the age of modern mass media, such groups have indeed sought to utilize varied means of cultural production, in order to manipulate the parameters of the 'common sense' through which their actions, and their role in society is viewed. Thus, many modern scholars have begun to examine the ways in which the manifold ways that oil is represented in our collective intellectual, media and popular cultures, have informed and enhanced the "socio-political dynamics of energy", and served the interests of "the myriad agents, relations, and precarious assemblages that give oil its political substance."[38]

Carola Hein has focused on the way that such cultural imprints are actively constructed by agents of oil, arguing for a deeper understanding of the instrumentalist benefits of this active curation of oil's cultural presence.[39] An architectural historian by training, Hein refers to how the 'physical and financial flows of petroleum' have been built into our physical and conceptual landscapes.[40] She argues that different levels of production – "the physical, represented, and everyday" – combine to produce the "global palimpsestic petroleumscape."[41] To Hein, this complex array of practices "have established path dependencies (to use a concept developed in the political sciences) and created an energy

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[38] A. Toscano, "Petropolitics as Retro-politics: Oil and the Geopolitical Imagination." Paper presented at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Petropolitics Conference, October 2010: http://www.gold.ac.uk/media/Toscano_petropolitics_retropolitics.pdf.
[39] Carola Hein, "Oil Spaces: The Global Petroleumscape in the Rotterdam/The Hague Area," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no.5 (2018).
[40] Carola Hein, "Oil Spaces," 887.
[41] Hein, "Oil Spaces," 888.

culture with multiple feedback loops, both spatial and represented."[42] In other words, oil has been written into our global, cultural landscapes through means of cultural production, rendering an array of 'feedback loops' which serve to govern collective perception of the oil assemblage, and underpin its hegemonic socio-economic position. Such a conception emphasizes the cumulative nature of this process over time, denoting the way that collective generations of agents and institutions of oil have collectively rendered a cultural framework in which the logics and the power structures of *oil* are perpetuated.

As such, the following essay shall draw inspiration from both Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, and the conceptualization of collective oil cultures provided by scholars like Hein, in conceiving of a constructed *Petro-cultural hegemony.* By this term, I mean to denote the collection of ideas, values, and assumptions that have been inculcated into collective imaginaries by oil companies, through varied means of cultural production. In so doing, companies such as Aramco have sought to shape our collective perceptions of these oil companies, and indeed oil itself, serving to perpetuate the hegemonic position of *oil* within our global economic and political order.

Finally, it should briefly be noted that the notion of cultures in this analysis should be understood to denote the collective array of ideas, values and norms that constitute social imaginaries of various scale. As we shall see throughout the course of this essay, Aramco sought to exert influence on collective cultures of various scales. – National, regional, global, but also on an institutional level.

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[42] Ibid.

Sources and Source Criticism

The source materials examined in this thesis reflect the varied mediums of intellectual and cultural production that comprised Aramco's extensive public relations programme in the period under investigation. Herein we shall briefly elucidate some salient aspects of these key sources, as well as the broader category of media they represent, within the slate of Aramco public relations slate. Of these sources, three have been analysed in particular detail.

Undoubtedly the most well-known and widely penetrating form of cultural production undertaken by Aramco in this period, was the history of the company that Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist and historian Wallace Stegner was hired to compose. Entitled *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil*, Stegners' work was serialized in the *Aramco World* company magazine over fourteen volumes in 1970 and 1971*;* the full work was then published in book form later in 1971, with an added introduction by Stegner. [43]

The company had in fact commissioned Stegner in 1956 and had exercised significant editorial influence over the piece in an extensive editing process, however a series of convulsive political crises that engulfed Saudi Arabia and the wider Middle Eastern region, saw the project shelved for over a decade before being resurrected by *Aramco World* editor Paul Hoye. The primary value of the work, Hoye reasoned in correspondence with a senior company executive, was in the rebuttal of critics' "blanket indictments of 'economic imperialism' that have obscured the enormous contributions that fair, enlightened, far-seeking companies like Aramco have made in the development area."[44]

Stegner's 'history' only covered the formation and early development of the Aramco venture, before the major post war expansion, and set forth a highly romanticized view of this period. The work served to enshrine many of the narrative strands of what, by the time of writing, was a fast-developing body of corporate mythology. Indeed, in Stegners appraisal, this period "seen in retrospect… ha[d] the nostalgic, almost mythic quality of an action from the age of giants."[45]

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[43] Wallace Stegner, *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil,* 2nd Ed (Chicago: Selwa Press, 2007).
[44] Robert Vitalis, 'Wallace Stegner's Arabian Discovery: Imperial Blind Spots in a Continental Vision', *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no.3 (2007): 429-30.
[45] Stegner, Discovery, 30.

Second, the following analysis shall include examination of the 1948 documentary *Desert Venture,* produced by Aramco's original parent company Socal.[46] Along with various forms of textual production, Aramco produced several also produced several documentaries during the period under investigation, yet this is the only one still accessible for research. This film, which would have been screened in a range of corporate and educational settings, as well in public cinemas at the time of its release, providing the company's version of the unique industrial project it had established in Saudi Arabia. The following analysis shall analyse the discursive content of *Desert Venture*, which provided crucial insight into the company's early strategies of representation, through which they hoped to influence cultural perception of the Aramco project.

Finally, we shall consider the *Aramco Handbook* produced in 1960; an extensive document representing an updated compilation of earlier volumized works from 1950 and 1952.[47] The *Handbook* did not resemble what most would imagine a company handbook to be. Rather, it was an officious, 343-page hardback, detailing Aramco's version of the history of the kingdom, the region and the company, authored primarily by three men (Roy Lebkicher, George Rentz and Max Steineke), all of whom held senior positions within the company's Arabian Affairs division, which as we have seen was responsible for research and strategy, for company public relations within the Middle East.[48] My analysis will explore the content and tone of the narratives put forth within the handbook, created in pursuit of its stated purpose of "help[ing] Aramco employees see the Aramco venture in proper perspective."[49]

There are also a range of other primary source materials, produced as part of Aramco's public relations programme, which shall form more ancillary aspects of the following analysis. Volumes of *Aramco World,* in which *Discovery!* was originally published, are available to researchers but unfortunately only from 1960 onwards. However, volumes of the *Standard Oil of California Bulletin* are available for this crucial early post war period during which. Indeed, this inhouse magazine of the original owning company of the Aramco

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[46] "Desert Venture," YouTube video, 27:52, posted by AramcoExPats.com, March 8, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRqloYCgwXo.
[47] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 131.
[48] Their respective roles are detailed in the 'cast of characters' section of Vitalis, *America's Kingdom, xxi*: Lebkicher, Head of the company's Political Affairs Division; Rentz, Director of the Arabian Research and Translation Department; and Max Steineke, the Head Geologist credited with the first discovery of oil in the Kingdom.
[49] Roy Lebkicher, George Rentz and Max Steineke, *Aramco Handbook* (Arabian American Oil Company, 1960), 2.

subsidiary contained some of the first company-sponsored public pronouncements on the Aramco venture within American media. Material from these two publications, as well as other individual pieces of Aramco-sponsored media production, shall also be sporadically drawn upon to substantiate thematic aspects of this analysis.

Moreover, as already mentioned, the company subsidized the work of academics such as Bailey Winder, Elizabeth Monroe, and George Lenczowski. Such works, like *Discovery!*, could be argued to more closely resemble hagiography rather than serious works of history. Indeed, Lenczowski's *Oil and State in the Middle East* (1960) even featured an introduction vetted and edited by Aramco.[50] This introduction, as well as the rest *Oil and State in the Middle East* has therefore also been examined in the forthcoming analysis, seeking to locate this potentially gap between hagiography and historiography.

All the sources mentioned above were produced, either directly or indirectly, as part of Aramco's extensive panoply of public relations material output. As such, they must be understood as aspects of representation, reflective of events and dynamics as Aramco wished them to be viewed. The lack of objectivity inherent within each of these sources is therefore an asset in the context of this analysis, which primarily seeks to understand the nature of Aramco's cultural representation, rather than the genuine nature of its Saudi operation and the prevalent historical and socio-political dynamics that surrounded it.

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[50] George Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East,* (Ithaca, NY, 1960).

Methodology

The following analysis shall thus seek to explore the specific ways that the new, propaganda-like methods of cultural influence and control considered above, were implemented by Aramco in the post-war period in pursuit of its corporate objectives. In particular, we shall examine the specific narratives and thematic associations that the company propagated through its panoply of cultural production, in order to achieve these objectives.

Of the sources utilized in this analysis, the ones that form the primary basis of analysis (those of considerable length and prominence within Aramco's complete array of public relations materials from this period) were initially studied in their entirety, to try and glean an exhaustive appraisal of their content and determine any prominent and/or consistent themes within them. Subsequently, in consultation with the relevant secondary source material, attention was focused upon specific aspects deemed to be of considerable relevance to Aramco's projected cultural narratives and image. Specifically, attention was focused upon the specific themes which consistently reoccurred within such materials. Given their prominence both within the materials themselves and within the relevant secondary literature, these were confidently determined to be salient thematic aspects of Aramco's public relations programme.

These aspects include: the respective representation of key actors and entities such as Aramco and its agents, the Saudi Royal family, and other relevant corporate and state entities; the representation of key processes or events such as Aramco's various industrial policies and programmes, as well as those of other relevant entities; and key conceptual themes such as exceptionalism and modernity.

The aim of this analysis is thus to render a detailed exposition of these thematic aspects, examining the precise nature of Aramco's representation of them, through various mediums of cultural production. Through detailed analysis of the discursive composition of such themes, in conjunction with existing scholarship in this subject area, we can see how the represented nature of such aspects and themes may differ from the reality of the historical reality of the Aramco project. We shall also consider the style and emphasis of Aramco's representation of such themes, considering how these may serve to shape and influence meaning. In doing so, the aim is to reconstruct the impetus and form of Aramco's efforts to influence cultural perception in this period in accordance with its public relations strategies.

As is the case in almost all studies of discourse, there is a certain degree of subjectivity to this type of analysis. Indeed, it is impossible to definitively speak to the motivations behind strategies of cultural production without access to types of evidence such as internal company documents, which in the case of Aramco are not widely accessible save for a couple of physical archive collections in the United States.[51]

Nevertheless, I shall argue that there are clear and consistent thematic trends within Aramco's cultural production throughout the period under investigation which point to a clear and consistent strategy of discursive and imagistic messaging.

The other main limitation to this study, is similarly derived from an issue of access to source material. As mentioned above, some of the public relations materials produced by Aramco in the period under investigation, such as *Island of Allah* or the volumes of *Aramco World* prior to 1960, are likewise unavailable to most researchers. Such materials would have obviously been a welcome addition to this analysis, providing greater range in source material. Yet, in the case of Island of Allah, there is ample secondary information about both the content and provenance of the film which allow for an adequate exegesis of its relevance to Aramco's overall public relations programme. More generally, irrespective of the absence of some materials, there is certainly an adequate amount, explored herein, to render a detailed analysis of Aramco's cultural production in this period.

Finally, my inability to speak Arabic has obviously precluded the incorporation of detailed analyses of the various public relations materials that Aramco produced in Arabic for dissemination throughout the Arab world. Future research into these materials by an Arabic-speaker would complement the forthcoming analysis and provide a more holistic understanding of the global reach of Aramco's public relations programme.

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[51] The William E. Mulligan Papers, located at Lauinger Library, Special Collections, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. are considered the most illuminating collection of such evidence in the Ramco context. See Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.

Chapter 1: Identity of Exceptionalism.

Towards the end of *Discovery!*, Wallace Stegner set out a vision of the historical significance of the Aramco project:

> *"They were building something new in the history of the world: not an empire made for plundering by the intruding power, but a modern nation in which American and Arab could work out fair contracts, produce in partnership, and profit mutually by their association."*[52]

By the time he came to write this passage in the winter of 1956, the "pioneer time of exploration and excitement" eulogised in Stegner's narrative had definitively passed. [53] The company had emerged from the Second World War in a state of rapid, exponential growth and now stood as a major player in global oil. Yet, as they expanded, and as we will see, so too did the challenges they faced. In response, and in an attempt to maintain its privileged position within Saudi Arabia and the global economy, Aramco would implement an increasingly extensive and sophisticated programme of narrative and imagistic messaging, in line with modern strategies of an increasingly important 'public relations' field.

Stegner's passage above encapsulates many of the key narrative strands of the elaborate corporate mythology that Aramco would construct in the post-war era. The carefully curated, interweaving narratives of development, partnership, uplift, and the like, which we shall come to examine in greater detail over the following chapters, were all constituent planks of Aramco's attempt to fashion an image of itself as a venture, as an institution, which was indeed 'something new in the history of the world'. Indeed, the continual assertion of this inherent corporate exceptionalism would pervade almost all of Aramco's public relations production in the decades after the Second World War. As Marchland has observed, public pronouncements of moral rectitude and fundamental institutional principles characterized major American corporations' attempts to demonstrate to an increasingly mistrusting American public, "virtues that stood apart from purely business values".[54] In this way, according to Marchland, corporations sought to construct the kind of defined cultural identity

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[52] Stegner, *Discovery,* 223.
[53] Stegner, *Discovery*, 223.
[54] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 2.

that had long been attached to dominant cultural perspectives of religious or political institutions.[55] The creation of such value-based institutional identity was certainly a prominent aspect of Aramco's public relations strategy in the second half of the twentieth century and would come to form a lens through which the company was viewed within dominant cultural understandings and discourse.

[55] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 2.

Section 1: Altruism/ New Approach/ Anti-Imperialism

As mentioned above, Aramco's self-image of exceptionalism was at root predicated on a supposedly enlightened approach to its operations and a subsequent commitment to the welfare of its host kingdom and its populace. As with all pretensions to exceptionalism, Aramco's claims to represent 'something new' in the context of foreign extractive industry, was constructed in opposition to a perceived alternative – here the malevolent and exploitative practices that had characterised previous oil extraction in the Middle East and elsewhere, largely shaped by the frameworks of European colonialism that had dominated global resource extraction in previous centuries.

Marchland's exegesis of corporate identity formation through public relations explains that such strategies were developed in response to a prevalent 'crisis of legitimacy' at turn of the century. This perceived crisis was a product of the 'muckraking' exposés and political opposition which were themselves a response to the growing size and influence of America's corporate leviathans, including Aramco.[56] In this section, we shall chart the development of these strategies, and note the sources of opposition that shaped them – with, of course, a special focus on the company's projection of a defined institutional exceptionalism, set in direct contrast to the notions of exploitation and imperialism.

The Foundations of Exceptionalism

The narrative of exceptionalism that constituted the core of the Aramco cultural identity, began to take shape even as oil production was resuming in earnest toward the end of the Second World War. In the United States, a rapidly increasing awareness of the Aramco venture and of its significance to a post-war global economy was heightened by oil czar Harold Ickes' highly publicized but ultimately unsuccessful plans for government acquisition of the oil subsidiary.[57] Increased involvement of U.S firms in Middle Eastern oil, and the prospect of increasing governmental participation in such projects, had ignited a firestorm of criticism, with multiple opponents across the political and industrial arenas, as well as in many sections of the media. Spearheaded by the New York Times, the most prominent theme of this opposition was the notion that the company's rapidly expanding operations in the

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[56] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 41.
[57] Yergin, *The Prize,* 395.

Middle Eastern kingdom constituted a de facto reversion to the "old imperialism"; a rehash of "dollar diplomacy and economic imperialism". [58] It was in this context, in response to the "welter of published misconceptions" concerning the company, that company man Phil McConnell first codified the myth of Aramco's exceptionalism in 1944 – to provide "a reliable picture of what the company is actually doing to assist the Saudi Arabian Government to develop its country."[59] 'All the things' the company had done, and would continue to do, to 'assist' the kingdom and its people, would remain a centre piece of Aramco's public relations messaging in the coming decades. As Standard Oil of California's 1948 documentary *Desert Venture* would assure its American viewers: from the outset, Aramco and its agents had "never forgotten" that they were "guests" in Saudi Arabia, and that "the best interests of its hosts must always be served".[60]

The House that Aramco Built

Aramco sought to substantiate its claims of unique concern uplift and 'fair' treatment of its Saudi nationals in a number of ways. An early, and oft-cited example of this commitment in Aramco's public relations materials, was the preoccupation with (Development and workers' welfare programmes to be explored further in subsequent chapters). A particularly revealing case can be found in the presentation of its housing programmes for Saudi and expat Arab workers, wherein the company was keen to highlight its efforts to replace its original stock of 'hastily' erected housing with "modern, well-built quarters" during the immediate post-war years.[61] In 1946, the Standard Oil of California company magazine would claim its new Arab quarters were "among the best in the Middle East".[62]

In reality, the claims being projected to American audiences of exceptional housing provision for Saudi workers were, like those related to other key metrics of working conditions and employee welfare, entirely fallacious. Vitalis points to an internal report produced by Standard Oil of New Jersey's (SONJ) Middle Eastern advisor Harold Hoskins in 1948, clearly stating that SONJ's joint venture with British Petroleum (BP), the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC), and BP's main Middle Eastern investiture, the Anglo Iranian Oil

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[58] Editorials, "Oil and the Near East," and "American Oil Policy,", New York Times, February 2, 1944: 16, and March 10, 1944: 14.
[59] "The Saudi Arabian Partnership", Oct. 7, 1944, Folder 12, The Saudi Arabian Partnership by Phil McConnell, Box 28, Letters, Journals, Interviews, Stegner Papers. Cited in Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 78-79.
[60] "Desert Venture,"18:25.
[61] "Desert Venture," 21:35.
[62] *Standard Oil of California Bulletin Autumn 1946*, 8.

Company (AIOC) were both actually outperforming Aramco on the extent, and relative quality, of housing provision for local Arab employees, as well as in comparative levels of pay and training.[63] Moreover, in his seminal work *America's Kingdom*, Vitalis has extensively demonstrated Aramco's discriminatory practices toward its Arab workforce during this period, operating a system of rigid racial hierarchy the structure of which had been imported wholesale from the mining industries of the American Jim-Crow South.[64]

The company insisted in its public relations material that it was operating a model of enlightened, egalitarian welfare capitalism in Saudi Arabia, whereby "one in every two dollars invested in the concession [went] into housing and other service facilities necessary to take care of 'Americans and Saudi Arabians alike".[65] In actuality, the housing programme was emblematic of a stark disparity in treatment between American and Arab. The 'concrete barracks equipped with bare light bulbs and non-dirt floors', which Saudi workers began moving into in 1947, and which the company had claimed to be amongst the best in the entire region, might indeed have been a slight improvement on the mud-floored huts that had proceeded them but they bore no resemblance to the luxurious accommodations and leisure facilities inside 'American Camp' which Saudi workers were expressly forbidden from entering.[66]

Vitalis' research has exposed the hollowness of Aramco's claims on working conditions and welfare and has revealed how the racially stratified organisation of its operations, with a privileged American minority occupying the dominant position, was entirely consistent with the logic of colonialism that the company so often invoked as a counterpoint to its own enlightened industrial philosophy. What in fact did distinguish Aramco from comparable historical and contemporary operations was the extent to which it deployed comprehensive public relations strategies as a component of its operations.[67] And in this way, Aramco began to successfully entrench the narrative of its exceptionalism within the American imaginary.

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[63] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom,*107
[64] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.
[65] "Desert Venture," 18:00.
[66] Vitalis, "Black Gold, White Crude," 201-202.
[67] George Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), 238-239; Lenczowski states that whilst all the oil majors operational in the Middle East had adopted public relations programmes by the mid 1950s, Aramco's was comfortably the most extensive and elaborate, partially because it was not partially owned by either producing state or consumer state.

Arabian Affairs:

Growing criticism in the Middle East itself would also play a significant role in the development of Aramco's public relations strategy in the post-war era, as a combination of labour unrest, and internal and regional opposition from populist political factions would see the company expand the scope of its public relations to include the region itself. Large scale labour strikes in 1945, over decidedly un-exceptional working conditions and discriminatory working practices, prompted the creation of the company's research and Arab relations unit, the Arabian Affairs Division (AAD).[68] Responsible for expanding PR strategy in Arab world in response to the fervent antipathy toward Aramco and other oil majors operating in the region, the AAD would begin broadcasting company messaging throughout the Middle East through various mediums including an Arabic version of the company magazine – *Qafilat al-Zayt* – from *1953.*

Subsequent major strike action in 1953 and 1956 took place against the backdrop of rising political opposition in the Middle East. Although most vociferously articulated by Pan-Arab nationalist movements spearheaded by that of Colonel Gamal Nasser in Egypt, opposition to the oil majors pervaded the region. Nationalization of foreign industry was "by decades end, claimed by all the various rival currents, movements, and personalities in the region… as a nations' right and necessity."[69] In response to this mounting opposition, the company redoubled its public relations efforts in the region. The firm began producing documentaries for screening throughout the region.[70]They even produced a feature film - *Jazirat al-Arab* or *Island of the Arabs* - which premiered in Cairo in 1955.[71]

We shall come to examine the dynamics of political opposition to the company within the kingdom, and the wider Middle Easter in more detail in Chapter 3. Suffice to say here, that the spread of nationalist ideology in the region, formulated in fundamental opposition to western imperialism, provided stronger impetus than ever for Aramco's expression of its exceptionalism narrative, preaching uplift and partnership as opposed to the 'plundering' tendencies of empire.

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[68] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 106.
[69] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 199.
[70] Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East,* 237.
[71] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 121-23.

Indirect Intellectual Production:

The company also initiated more indirect means of imbuing the pervasive political and discursive culture of the Arab world with notions of its corporate exceptionalism. For instance, in 1953 the Head of the Federal Trade Commission wrote to Secretary of State Dulles, alleging that Aramco had been secretly funding the *Beirut Star.* The claim was never investigated; however, the State Department did confirm in a report that Aramco had been paying Arab journalists to visit Dhahran and report on the company's wondrous commitment to Saudi uplift.[72]

This was the same approach the company had taken in the United States, attempting to further its influence over cultural perceptions through more indirect modes of intellectual production. However, as we have seen, such attempts in the American context, had extended to the cultivation of academics as well as journalists. One particularly salient example of the inculcation of Aramco's exceptionalism within western academia, and its contemporary relevance to Aramco's political position, can be found in Lenczowski's company-vetted introduction to *Oil and State in the Middle East,* 1960.[73] In tacit defence of Aramco, in the context of the increasing nationalist opposition the company the company was facing, Lenczowski asserted that the movements of political emancipation from imperial control in the Middle East had ensured an inevitable antipathy toward any form of "foreign capital and management…however benevolent, enlightened, and socially progressive [the] industrial concern may be".[74]

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[72] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom,*124-125.
[73] Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East.*
[74] Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East, 3.*

Section 2: The American Way

As seen above, the efforts of Aramco's public relations divisions to project a distinct corporate identity during the decade or so following the Second World War, rested on a narrative of exceptionalism. In fact, this narrative was formulated within the lexicon of an already well-defined discourse of American exceptionalism. The "intense consciousness of uniqueness", which William Appleman Williams regards as one of the defining themes in American history, has been the subject of extensive academic study in recent decades.[75] But the notion of American exceptionalism is also a clear and potent force in global cultural discourses, profoundly shaping conceptions of the "American experience and national identity".[76] As such, Aramco's projected corporate identity would be formulated as having an intrinsically "American flavour".[77]

The Teleology of American Exceptionalism

The instrumental utility of Aramco associating itself with popular conceptions of the intrinsic, *American* national character were twofold. First, Aramco was able to cast its presence in the Middle East within the context of the supposedly unique tradition of American interventions across the globe; a tradition founded upon the notion of what Michael Adas characterises as a "uniquely progressive and socially capacious character of American institutional and material development."[78] In laying claim to this legacy of American exceptionalism, the company implicitly bolstered its own narrative of purported exceptionalism (again formed either implicitly or explicitly in opposition to the legacy of European imperialism). Such associations underpinned the notion that its involvement in Saudi Arabia represented a well-established paradigm of foreign intervention that was "American and philanthropic rather than political and British".[79]

Encouraging an association with the 'American character' was not solely an assertion of moral exceptionalism, however. Rather, the cultural mythology of American exceptionalism also incorporated a supposed, singularly American talent and technical

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[75] William Appleman Williams, America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976 (New York, 1976), 27.
[76] Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon", 1692.
[77] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 1.
[78] Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon", 1695.
[79] Stegner's characterization of Socal's appeal to Ibn Saud during concession negotiations in 1933 in Stegner, *Discovery*, 14.

expertise which also played a key role in the historically unprecedented, American capacity for 'institutional and material development.' As Marchland notes, the notion of what was commonly known in 'Main Street vernacular' as "American know-how" - constituting a "shrewdness of judgement based on experience and a quick capacity to master technical apparatus" – was commonly invoked by large American corporations in the twentieth century.[80] The "state of mind" that Aramco would imply it had imported to Saudi Arabia, thus included a "startlingly American … high productivity … and knack of improvising" as well as the unique "optimism [and] generosity" which were commonly asserted to comprise the American 'national character'.[81] As we shall see, this purported, innate capacity for technological expertise would also play an extremely important role in Aramco's public relations narratives throughout this period.

The Projection of Aramco's American Character:

The intention to signify to the world the inherently American character of the firm was evident as early as 1944, when the California Arabian Standard Oil Company was rebranded Arabian American Oil Company. The name of the settlement which housed the company headquarters in the Kingdom, as well as the small cohort of its U.S employees and their families, was also changed from Casoc Town to American Camp.[82] Two years later, Socal would publish for American readers, its first account of its subsidiary in 'Sah-oo-dee Ah-ray-bee-ah," where "part of America has been put down amid the rock and sand".[83]

As Aramco's strategies of public relations production developed during the post war period, the company would assert its intrinsically 'American character' through far more elaborate and complex modes of narrative and imagistic production. In particular, they would do so by appealing to perhaps the most iconic cultural symbol of American exceptionalism - *the frontier,* casting the company and its agents in the role of the *pioneers.* One of the earlier attempts to eulogise the historic founding of Aramco, *Desert Venture* introduced the "hardy" and "determined" men that first arrived in Saudi Arabia to prospect for commercial scale oil supplies through the icon American language of frontier.[84] The rugged individuals needed for

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[80] Marchland, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 336.
[81] Stegner, *Discovery*, 84.
[82] Vitalis, Americas Kingdom, 79.
[83] "A Partnership in Oil and Progress", *Standard Oil of California Bulletin,* Autumn (1946)
[84] "Desert Venture," 7:08.

such a venture were inevitably sourced from the one place that "men are always found when the chance for pioneering is offered … across the breadth and depth of America".[85]

In the following decade, the company would further expand its efforts to harness the symbolic power of *the frontier*. Through the use of more stylized forms of cultural production, they sought to cement the association of Aramco with frontier imagery, producing romanticised depictions of the company's historical origins utilizing the *Western* aesthetic. Island of Allah, in recounting the tales of King Ibn Saud's unification of Saudi Arabia through daring military exploits, was done in a *Western* style which would have been instantly recognisable to an American audience.[86]

Yet by far the most elaborate and explicit invocation of the frontier in Aramco's public relations programme over the post-war period, came in the form of *Discovery!;* Stegner's self-conscious frontier epic, establishing beyond question the company's concerted efforts to incorporate the powerful imagery of frontier into its cultural institutional identity.

Stegner's Arabian *Frontier*

By the time he was commissioned by Aramco in 1956, Stegner had cemented his position as one of the preeminent voices of the American *Western* literary cannon, narrowly missing out on the Pulitzer Prize the previous year for his biography of the adventurer-cum-scientist John Wesley Powell.[87] *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* had reanimated the legacy of Powell as one of the heroes of the so-called 'second opening of the West' in the 1800s.[88] Vitalis notes that Stegner's biography established Powell as a cultural symbol of that special, American brand of expansionism encapsulated by the trope of frontier, an expansionism which "sought to resist mindless and destructive modes of development."[89] This was a subject matter which was very much in vogue at this point in mid-century - the historian David Wrobel has noted that "the early Cold War years saw a revival of the notion of American exceptionalism rooted in the nation's frontier heritage".[90]

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[85] "Desert Venture," 6:31-7:18.
[86] "Island of Allah" Bows - Review, *New York Times*, June 1956, https://www.nytimes.com/1956/06/27/archives/island-of-allah-bows.html?smid=em-share.
[87] Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the second opening of the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954).
[88] Vitalis, *Stegner's Discovery*, 407.
[89] Ibid.
[90] David M Wrobel, "Global West, American Frontier." *Pacific Historical Review* 78, no. 1 (2009): 2.

In this context then, it is not difficult to discern the logic of Aramco's public relations strategists in conceiving of a company history in this style; nor its choice of Stegner to pen such a work. The frontier represented a powerful, and ubiquitous motif within the American zeitgeist, the implicit meanings of which, as Patricia Limerick notes, would be clear and unambiguous to almost all Americans in the twentieth century. Stegner was the ideal candidate to guild the cultural understandings of Aramco's past with the hyper-romanticized, essentializing veneer of American exceptionalism; indeed, *Discovery!* was a tale of an "almost mythic quality, of an action from the age of giants."[91] Stegner's repeated reference to early Aramco staff in the kingdom as "pioneers" and "pilgrims" served to cement the association of Aramco and its representatives with the historical legacy of the frontier. [92] This association was most clearly illustrated by *Discovery's* particularly adulatory depiction of famed company geologist Max Steineke, on whom the company "asked Stegner specifically to add more detail" in his redraft. Steineke is portrayed as the archetype of American exceptionalism:

> *"… as a man, a companion, a colleague, he could not have been better adapted to the pioneering conditions he now encountered…. He was a very pure example of a very American type, and heir to every quality that America had learned while settling and conquering a continent."*[93]

Ultimately, through association with *frontier* in collective imaginaries, Aramco sought to appropriate this well-worn "metaphor for promise, progress, and ingenuity" to define the image of its past, in order to shape the parameters through which the company was perceived in the present.[94] Indeed, although the final chapter of *Discovery!* - 'The Frontier Closes' – firmly delineates this closure to the resumption of production in 1944; in 1948 the company still proclaimed itself to be "pioneering a new frontier of progress".[95]

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[91] Stegner, *Discovery*, 30.
[92] Stegner, *Discovery*: "Pilgrim" is repeated several times in Chapter 1, e.g. "Pilgrims of an unprecedented kind" 2; The characterisation of Aramco men as "pioneers is ubiquitous in the book, particularly in Chapter 2 where it is used 6 times within 5 pages, 35-39.
[93] Stegner, *Discovery*, 70.
[94] David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), H5.
[95] "Desert Venture," 25:40.

Section 3: Mission

The last two sections of this chapter have examined how Aramco sought to project a distinct cultural image of corporate exceptionalism, through the assertion of an enlightened altruism in its approach, derived largely from an essentialized 'American character'. In this section, we shall turn to the manner in which the company fused both such claims into a highly evocative (dramatized) narrative of corporate 'mission'. In portraying its operations as beneficial, or even necessary, to the well-being of various constituent groups and entities (Saudi's, Americans, and the wider world), it would incorporate this notion of virtuous mission or purpose into its asserted identity of exceptionalism.

Aramco's Saudi Mission:

As we have seen, in its public relations posture Aramco perpetually emphasized the modern, enlightened principles which guided the firm's treatment of both its Saudi Arabian workforce, and the broader Saudi population. The firm insisted that a fundamental "guiding principle" of its approach was the belief that "foreign capital cannot justify its presence in that land unless it operates in the interest of that land".[96]

Much of the way it sought to construct this narrative was through the representation of its supposedly precocious development programmes within the kingdom (the focus of the subsequent chapter). However, the company also asserted that its role in the kingdom exceeded the parameters of expressly *material* development. Rather, the 'benefit' the company brought to Saudi Arabia, in its telling, was not simply the practices of modern industrial infrastructure but also the essential cultural and technological modes that underpinned it.

This sense of Aramco as a kind of cultural mission is keenly felt within the narrative of *Discovery!* Much like the continual allegorical representation of the early Aramco 'pioneers', Stegner makes repeated reference to the Aramco men as cultural 'missionaries', in their dissemination of modern, western industrial culture in the Middle East:

> *'...if utter faith in a way of life, and an utter conviction that the rest of the world would be best served by adopting it, constitute the essential elements in missionary*

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[96] "Desert Venture," 25:51.

fervour, these men were missionaries as surely as were Dr. Harrisons Christians [missionaries] over on Bharain'.[97]

This 'missionary' characterization marks an assertion of the superiority of the culture that these American geologists and wildcat drillers carried with them upon their arrival in the Gulf, as well as a clear sense of virtue in their imparting of this culture to its inhabitants.

In his exegesis of the American exceptionalist tradition, Appleman notes that the fervent belief in the unique, superior nature of American civilization is married to a "hyperactive sense of mission" (in regard to its broader dissemination).[98] There was a strongly implicit sense of virtue and even divinity within this sense of mission, whereby the trans-continental expansion of American 'civilization' at the expense of the 'indigenous' way of life was legitimized by the fervent belief in the supremacy of the American cultural mode.[99]

Once more then, Stegner's 'history' of Aramco invokes imageries of the American past in order to lend a certain moral and ideological character to the company's foreign oil operations in the contemporary present. Whilst of course, not in any way comparable in terms of the cataclysmic consequences suffered by the native Americans in the nineteenth century, the logic and symbolism of manifest destiny is most certainly at play in Stegner's portrayal of some Aramco wildcatters as "missionaries, missionaries of what they would vaguely describe, at a time when the phrase was still hallowed, as the American way of life".[100] The cultural identity that the company sought to create for itself was therefore asserted to be imbued, at least tacitly, with the kind of semi-divine sense of civilizing mission that was inherent in the American expansionist ideology of manifest destiny, in which its continued control over oil industry in Saudi Arabia was cast as beneficial to the Saudi's.

<u>The Gospel According to Aramco:</u>

This conceptualization of the 'missionary' role of Aramco's American cohort was not merely symbolic. Rather, it aptly describes an important facet of the company's public relations strategy 'on the ground' in the kingdom. Indeed, the process depicted by Stegner of the 'American way' being transmitted through the interactions between the 'missionary'

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[97] Stegner, *Discovery*, 84.
[98] William Appleman Williams, *America Confronts a Revolutionary World, 1776-1976* (New York, 1976), 27.
[99] Adas, "From Settler Colony to Global Hegemon", 1695
[100] Stegner, *Discovery*, 216.

Americans and the Saudi Arab population was also explicitly set out in the *Handbook* materials produced by the company's Arabian Affairs Division. "Every American employee in Arabia [was] a representative of Aramco as an American company and of the American people in the eyes of the Saudi Arabs."[101] Every American employee 'on the ground', was to perform an important secondary function carrying "a public relations responsibility as important as the direct responsibilities involved in his job."[102] This may be taken as the true impetus behind the production of such an elaborate and officious document "primarily for American employees" addressing their "need to be well informed in order to shoulder the responsibilities placed upon them".[103] The company's Long Island training centre, opened in 1948 then relocated to Sidon in 1951, also served to instil the company perspective in its American employees before they took up their roles in Saudi Arabia.[104] Employees were not only to exemplify the "best American traditions of human relations" but also extol the virtues of the modern industrial philosophy and processes that the company represented.[105]

The National Interest and the Common Good

Finally, the narrative of *mission*, which Aramco sought to incorporate into its cultural identity, was not confined to the borders of the kingdom that hosted them. Aramco's rhetorical insistence on being an 'American' firm to the core, in tandem with its claim to specific industrial and moral characteristics, was also extended to repeated assertions to reflect the (American) 'national interest'. The argument most commonly advanced by the company in this regard was the claim that its Middle Eastern operations would play a crucial role in protecting domestic American oil supplies in the face of soaring global demand in the post-war age. Aramco claimed that European domination of Middle Eastern production, "to the exclusion of American interests", would mean "Americans might be compelled to pay whatever prices were demanded by these [European] countries for their oil".[106] This basic argument was repeatedly advanced in Aramco's public relations materials.[107]

In a similar vein, the couching of its operations within a narrative of high-minded public service was also expressed within a global context. In 1948, Socal's *Desert Venture*

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[101] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 210.
[102] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 221.
[103] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 2.
[104] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 20.
[105] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 7.
[106] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook,* 106.
[107] See, "Desert Venture," 24:00.

documentary claimed that not only was the company "keyed perfectly to the goal of self-support" for the newly formed Saudi Arabian Kingdom, but that "[it is also] making available the vast volumes of petroleum needed to fuel the job of rebuilding the war-scarred Eastern hemisphere."[108]Years later, the global scope of the company's altruistic mission was reframed along the lines of their central narrative tropes of global development and cooperation: "large parts of the free world would now be severely handicapped if the great oil resources of the Middle East did not exist or if they had not been discovered and developed by enterprising oil companies in cooperation with friendly governments."[109]

This narrative of maintaining global supply was one crafted in cooperation with, or possibly even at the direction of, the State Department, who were similarly anxious to ensure that the company retained its influence over Saudi production, in order to ensure stable prices for Middle Eastern oil.[110] Indeed, Mitchell asserts that the U.S government strategists had devised a strategy for an "international framework" which would give corporate oil operations "the appearance of a trusteeship".[111] Such a framework would frame western control over Middle Eastern oil fields as a "means of making the oil available to every country that needed it, and present this 'equitable' management as a principle that disqualified the claims of producer countries to control their own oil."[112] Original contrived during the war, the original plan was for a government agency to play the role of trustee, however after the attempt to purchase a controlling share of the Casoc subsidiary in 1943 was blocked by Socal and Texaco, Washington had to accept an indirect model of influence.[113]

Through the transmission of such narratives the company were able to portray its Saudi operations not as a project of corporate avarice, but rather of profound national and international strategic importance. In so doing, it was able to circumscribe many of the lines of criticism that may have been levelled against it by attaching a sense of innate virtue and service to the institutional identity that Aramco strived to create for itself within the American and global imaginary. Indeed, in the company's telling, the establishment of the Aramco constituted a great victory for the common good; "a victory which is serving the

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[108] "Desert Venture," 23:10.
[109] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook,* 7.
[110] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy,* 113-14.
[111] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy,* 114.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy,* 114.

interest of the United States, of the country who's resources they are developing, and of a world that moves on wheels. This is the story of oil in Saudi Arabia".[114]

[114] Prologue to "Desert Venture".

Chapter 1 Conclusion:

George Lenczowski, one of the scholars subsidized by Aramco, argued in 1960 that the impetus behind the widespread adoption of public relations strategies by the oil majors operating in the Middle East, was the pervasive misinformation caused by "ignorance, emotion, or wilful distortion".[115] According to Lenczowski, such "multifarious exaggerations and falsehoods" could only be dispelled through "an effort to refute them and to present the truth to the public. Recognizing this need, practically every company has set up a public relations unit."[116]

In the 16 years before Lenczowski published this rather generous appraisal, Aramco's public relations output had outstripped that of any of its major oil competitors in the region of Middle Eastern oil.[117] Central to the company's strategy of public relations, however, was the construction of a defined, corporate self-image riddled with 'emotion', 'exaggerations', and 'falsehoods'.

Ove the course of the preceding chapter, we have charted Aramco's construction of this identity. We saw first how Aramco's claimed exceptionalism, was founded upon the assertion of inherently 'modern', enlightened principles set in direct opposition to historic modes of exploitation and imperialism which formed the content of the charges set against it by opposition in the United States and in the Arab world.

Further, Aramco's exceptionalist image was constructed through the appropriation of pre-existing cultural assumptions of an American national character; through incorporating the well-established constituent facets of American exceptionalism into the company's own cultural identity. In particular, Aramco utilized the sanctified American symbol of *the frontier* in order to crystalize this coalescence of national and institutional exceptionalism. Finally, Aramco's identity of exceptionalism was imbued with an inherent sense of mission. As such, the company could paint its operations in Saudi Arabia not as a mere profit-seeking venture, but rather as an undertaking in service of collective or common good. Reflecting its uniquely conscionable industrial philosophy, and in keeping with the storied American tradition of enlightened cultural expansionism, there's was a venture that would empower rather than

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[115] Lenczowski, *Oil and State in the Middle East*, 235.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West, 256-58.*

exploit the Saudi Arabian people. Perhaps even more vital, this was also an operation serving to protect the interests of the American nation, and of the free world.

These elements collectively constituted the essence of Aramco's constructed cultural identity. Through its public relations programmes, the company projected this image into the collective imaginaries of the United States in particular, seeking to entrench the tenets of its institutional exceptionalism. This cultural identity was designed to form an assumptive base from which it was hoped that the company and its actions would be perceived; a set of foundational values or characteristics that constituted a distinct corporate character, bestowed with assumed legitimacy, prestige, and virtue. As Stegner expresses in the belatedly penned introduction to *Discovery!*:

"Every American, even if he could not place Saudi Arabia on the map, knows that Aramco is one of those 'legendary institutions' … and it would be remarkable if the ordinary American…did not take some satisfaction in a company like this."[118]

[118] Stegner, *Discovery*, xxv.

Chapter 2: Development and Modernity

Narratives pertaining to development and modernization were absolutely fundamental to the image that Aramco sought to construct as a foreign private equity firm operational in an 'underdeveloped region'. Until the Saudi government began nationalising the company in the 1970s, these narrative themes were continually marshalled to define its role within the kingdom. Rather than an exploitative imposition of foreign capital, Aramco claimed to play a prominent role within the nascent processes of state building, as a philanthropic, developmentalist force.

In the first section of this chapter, we shall consider the company's representation of its 'development' activities. Along with its employee welfare programmes, housing provision and training and education commitments, the company initiated a number of high-profile infrastructural projects throughout the 1940s and 1950s. But, again, the narratives that Aramco sought to construct around its 'development' role, did not necessarily align with reality. As we shall see, examination of the gap between image and reality reveals the instrumentalist benefits of Aramco's narrative creation.

The subsequent two sections shall examine how Aramco's rhetoric and image-based representations of both the Saudi Arabian kingdom and its inhabitants, and the company and its agents, contributed to the construction of a narrative legitimizing its sustained presence in the kingdom and its role within its industrial infrastructure.

Section 1: Development

As briefly alluded to in the previous chapter, Aramco's insistence on its precocious commitment to development was one of the substantive narratives underpinning the company's assertion of its modern, enlightened approach. Indeed, the company would perpetually seek to emphasize its role as an agent of development within the newly formed Saudi state. To this end, it would time and again emphasize its role in a number of high-profile development and modernization projects in the kingdom which, as Parker asserts, allowed it to "construct a self-image as a partner in growth", rather than as a malignant, self-serving foreign entity.[119] Aside from its self-proclaimed status as one of the great centres for vocational and industrial training in the Middle East", the company would also stress its prominent role in the transformation of wider Saudi infrastructure.[120] It would brag of the "the building of hard-surfaced roads, and the development of a large air and ground transportation system and telephone and radio communications to connect the communities and to supply and keep in touch with operations being carried on over a wide area."[121] Whilst its "most spectacular project", was the Saudi Government Railroad "built by Aramco for the Government's account".[122]

Whilst we shall later return to some of these initiatives, one showpiece project, above all others, demonstrates the centrality of 'development' to Aramco's public relations mythmaking – the model farms of the al-Kharj Oasis. Through particular focus on this experimental agricultural project, we can see how Aramco's selective and embellished portrayal of its development efforts were so crucial to the narratives that the company sought to construct in regard to its role in the kingdom.

Al-Kharj Farms

The al-Kharj oasis project was an initiative, established in the early 1940s, aimed at the transformation of Saudi Arabian agriculture through modern irrigation technologies, amongst other practices. The project featured prominently from the earliest stages of Aramco's developing post-war public relations operations.

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[119] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 74.
[120] "Desert Venture," 19:05.
[121] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 6.
[122] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 75.

By 1948, the company was portraying the project as "among [its] most important undertakings for the benefit of the Saudi Arabs".[123] The project, it was asserted, was emblematic of the company's willingness to engage in modernization initiatives "wholly unconnected with oil operations".[124] Such undertakings, according to Aramco, clearly demonstrated its status as "a good 'citizen of the country and as a friend."[125] The model farms at al-Kharj were therefore presented as a foremost example of the company's commitment to partnership in growth, the impetus for which was, once again, to be located in the missionary spirit which had defined the Aramco venture from the very beginning:

> "*…their [the early Aramco personnel] missionary zeal made them fall in enthusiastically with reclamation and conservation plans … in particular, it led them into active and continued cooperation with the al-Kharj oasis project."*[126]

Yet, Stegner's account of what had, by the 1950s, had become a well-established part of Aramco lore, severely misrepresents the spirit in which Aramco involved itself with the al-Kharj farms project. Most crucially, Vitalis has shown through analysis of private company records that Aramco initially refused numerous requests from the Saudi Government to take over the floundering agricultural project (which had initially been led by Egyptian and Iraqi engineers).[127] As a result, two agricultural missions from the U.S State Department (in 1942 and 1944) provided the 'Western' technical expertise that oversaw the establishment of modern irrigation and land reclamation technology there. The company's minimal contribution amounted to some initial surveying of the land around the Oasis and was billed to the Saudi Kingdom against future royalties and taxes – as, in fact, was the case with all Aramco's major modernization projects. Aramco would eventually take over the running of the project at the behest of the Saudi government in 1950, after the Truman administration withdrew its funding for the mission the previous year. However, this oversight of the project, as the showcase of company's newly created Arab Industrial Development Department, lasted just four years before Aramco handed responsibility for the farms back to the Saudi state.[128]

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[123] "Desert Venture," 21:35.
[124] "Desert Venture," 21:42.
[125] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook, 196-97.*
[126] Stegner, *Discovery*, 219.
[127] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 71.
[128] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 71-74.

In reality then, Aramco's only meaningful contribution to the model farms project was in an administrative rather than a developmental capacity and did not begin until two years *after* it had begun advertising it as amongst its 'most important' contributions to the welfare of the Saudi populace. Nonetheless, Aramco had, from the first, sought to indelibly attach its name to the high-profile modernization project. It did so because it wished to present itself as a sort of development mission within the kingdom, rather than as simply an overtly industrial concern:

> *"Altogether [the company] looked upon al-Kharj as one of the most valuable contributions it was making to Arabia, because this agricultural development helped make use of renewable sources, not expendable ones; this could be part of a permanently new Arabia, and to their brand of missionary spirit, this was the kind of change that counted."* [129]

'Private' Point 4:

Stegner's typically valorising appraisal of Aramco's role in the al-Kharj farms clearly denotes the place held by the project within Aramco's corporate mythology, as a symbol of its overall 'missionary' vision of development in the Kingdom. In furnishing this vision, Aramco's public relations output would again reach for an affiliation, or even partial amalgamation with, the United States and the discourses surrounding American global interventionism.

In 1949, President Truman's inaugural address set forth a significant shift in American foreign policy. In this address, Truman stated that America's future programme for "peace and freedom will emphasise four major courses of action". Designed to stimulate economic development and geo-political security in the so-called "developing countries", in 'point four' Truman enshrined a new vision of American technical assistance for partner countries in order to make "the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas".[130] Just two years after Truman's address, Aramco began explicitly stating its affinity with the model of Point Four developmentalism,

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[129] Stegner, *Discovery*, 219.
[130] Harry S. Truman, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 1949, Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, accessed June 23, 2024, https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/19/inaugural-address.

framing its Saudi operation as a "private Point Four program … free for the American people".[131]

Point Four was a landmark in the transition toward international development, which would prove the central plank of United States' global foreign policy for decades to come. The language of development was henceforth ubiquitous within American discourses on foreign affairs. It is in this context that Aramco's own emphasis on development, within its corporate narrative creation, must be understood. But we also need to understand that the conscious allusion to Point Four, in the presentation of Aramco's public relations, is an unambiguous attempt to capitalize on an already culturally engrained conceptual framework of contemporary American development initiatives.

This linguistic framing would thus firmly attach the Aramco cultural identity with a well-established model of international development, within the American imaginary. Not only did this aid in emphasizing the company's posture as a constructive and altruistic force in the Middle East, it also brought the corporate venture in line with American foreign policy vision. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the company sought to cast its operations as pursuant of the 'national interest', providing a counter narrative to that of a typically avaricious, rent-seeking private entity advanced by some of the Aramco's domestic critics. The combined effect was to lend a sense of legitimacy and purpose to Aramco's Saudi operations that transcended the realm of commercial profit and gave the appearance of a coherent geo-political project: a "private Point Four programme for Arabia, long before there was a Point Four program in Washington."[132]

Performative Development

Initiatives such as the al-Kharj model farms were fundamental to the company's cultivation of this developmentalist narrative. As such, despite having played a fairly minimal, and begrudging role, in the project the farms were enthusiastically incorporated into the Aramco's cultural image creation, as a potent symbol of the transformative impact that Aramco was having on the developing Saudi kingdom. The staying power of this basic narrative, within the American imaginary at least, was demonstrated as recently as 2002, when an article in the *New Yorker* characterised the project as Aramco's attempt "to

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[131] "Point $ without the Taxpayers", Los Angeles Times, March. 20, 1951.
[132] Stegner, *Discovery*, 216-17.

introduce agriculture to the kingdom".[133]The reality was altogether less impressive. The project remained relatively small-scale and experimental throughout its lifespan, while internal company audits reveal that during the four years Aramco actually oversaw the running of the farms, they were operating at a continuous loss.[134] The company could not then, feasibly claim to have any real transformative effect on the Saudi agricultural sector. Nonetheless, the symbolic value to the company was significant.

The other projects incorporated into Aramco's development narratives can be seen to follow a similar pattern. For instance, Aramco portrayed its training programmes as the central facet of its 'stewardship' of the Saudi oil industry, designed to "welcome [Saudi Arabs] into higher levels of management" through the provision of necessary education and experience.[135] Yet, in reality, recent scholarship has demonstrated that such programmes were designed to provide specific training "in only a limited number of skills" in order to ensure that Saudi Arab workers could only advance to a certain level within the company structure, and thus that the American executive class would retain directive control of the company. [136] Thus whilst the training schemes satisfied Aramco's abiding interest in making use of native labour", they were actually designed to inhibit rather than enhance the development of meaningful Saudi agency over their own oil resources.[137] Similarly, the railway 'built by Aramco for the Government's account' was lauded as the most 'spectacular' example of its transformative impact on Saudi infrastructure. However, for Saudi Arabia's infrastructure needs, "trains were a mistake".[138] Feasibility studies conducted beforehand 'made clear' that the project would run at a loss, and that a highway system would be far more beneficial; both of which proved to be the case.[139] A highway system was later adopted, and the railroad made no meaningful contribution to modernizing Saudi infrastructure.[140]

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[133] Nicholas Lemann, "The Way they Were", *New Yorker, April 15, 2002.*
[134] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 73.
[135] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 212.

[136] Wedian Mohammed Albalwi, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Impression Management: The American Arabian Oil Company (Aramco), 1932–1974*. PhD thesis, Newcastle University 2020, 135.

[137] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 111.
[138] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 74-75.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.

In reality then, Aramco's vaunted development project can be seen to be largely performative, holding limited practical value in the context of Saudi Arabian state building, whilst being of great symbolic utility to the company in demonstrating its deep-seated development ethos. The extent to which Aramco was able to inculcate this narrative into collective cultures can be seen in much of the relevant historiography. For instance, Joy Winkie Viola claimed in 1986 that, "in the annals of human manpower development, there has probably never been a story to equal ARAMCO's "ever evolving mission" to provide training and education to Saudi's preceding an orderly transition."[141] Irvine Anderson, one of the most prominent scholarly voices on Aramco, similarly attributed such programmes to Aramco's 'missionary enthusiasm for spreading American expertise".[142]

[141] Joy Winkie Viola, *Human Resources Development in Saudi Arabia: Multinationals and Saudization* (Boston: International Human Resources Development Corporation, 1986), 1.
[142] Anderson, *Aramco, The United States and Saudi Arabia,* 112.

Section 2: "A Strange and Ancient Land"

Throughout the previous section, we have begun to see how Aramco's public relations men attempted to legitimate their role in Saudi Arabia, by projecting the firm as an agent of broad development and modernization within the kingdom. We have also seen how the company sought to narrate this role as some kind of philanthropic cultural mission; of Aramco importing the tenets of modern American industry and culture into their host kingdom, in the same way, they imply, as occurred in North America in the nineteenth century in the age of *Frontier* expansion. In this section we shall more closely examine the cultural construction of Aramco's Arabian *frontier.*

The version of Saudi Arabia that pervaded Aramco's public relations materials, at least those produced for a western audience, was the one that best suited the self-image it sought to create of a 'foreign' oil venture, operating within a far-flung region. *This* Saudi Arabia furnished the contextual setting in which it wished their operations to be perceived as taking place.

Arabian Antiquity

The image of Arabia that Aramco sought to perpetuate in its cultural output seems above all else to have been a land of 'antiquity'. Throughout Aramco's public relations material in the post war period, particularly those that present an extensive view of Saudi Arabia prior to the full realization of large-scale industrial oil infrastructure, the ancient nature of the kingdom is the overriding theme. The depiction is not that of a primitive land, but rather "a place of ancient glories", which has nonetheless "fallen into eclipse", a hinterland of the modern world.[143]

As discussed in the previous chapter, Stegner unsurprisingly obliged in the writing of an unambiguous frontier epic for the company. His depiction of this Arabian frontier was entirely consistent with the romanticized imagery of wide, untamed expanses that are synonymous with the Western genre; transposed from the lands west of the Mississippi to those that lay under "the great dark-blue Arabian sky sequined with stars."[144] Yet Stegner's depiction of the Northern American frontier territories, like many formed in the American gaze, was ahistoric with 'history' only beginning with the arrival of pioneering bearers of

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[143] "Desert Venture," 1:26. This summary of Arabia's historic decline is also repeated almost verbatim in Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook,* 13.
[144] Stegner, *Discovery*, 69.

civilization. The native inhabitants of these lands too were "static holdovers from that timeless wilderness world".[145]

In contrast, the narrative of *Discovery!* makes numerous, explicit references to the ancient Arabian past. The very first American in the narrative, who, alighting at the dock in Riyadh, brings the 'nervous needs of the 20th century into contact with the undeveloped possibilities of a land older than Abraham."[146] The text is then punctuated with references and comparisons to great Arab figures of the ancient past such as "Saladin" and "Sennaacherib", the Sargonid King of Assyria.[147] In the muddled allegory of *Discovery!*, this is a land that appears to still be languishing in antiquity upon the arrival of Aramco's pioneers of industrial modernity - pioneers who would seek to "bring all their gods with them into Latium."[148]

This was not merely a stylistic choice on the part of Stegner. The other main depiction of the Arabian Peninsula which the company produced for a Western audience, also focused heavily on the long annals of Arab history. *Island of Allah* was released in American cinemas in 1956, a year after its Arabic-language counterpart Jazirat al-`Arab (Island of the Arabs) had premiered in Cairo. The film presented audiences with what one reviewer called a "tasteless combination of travelogue, historical drama, and documentary" which did "little more than recreate some of the more prominent moments in Arab history as it rambles across the desert."[149] The company had more than one reason for committing to film this whistle-stop tour of over 6000 years of Arab history "from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf and from the Arabian Sea to the Euphrates".[150] The strategy behind such a project for the 'Arab world', will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter, however for a Western audience, the film served to reinforce the image of Arabia that the firm wished to present - Arabia as a land anchored in the past, which had slowly fallen further and further behind the modern world; but a land of 'undeveloped' possibilities.

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[145] Elliott West and Curt Meine, "Wallace Stegner's West, Wilderness, and History," in *Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision*, ed. Curt Meine (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997), 85.
[146] Stegner, *Discovery*, 3
[147] Stegner, *Discovery*,136-39.
[148] Stegner, *Discovery*, 84. Reference to the Aeneid, implicitly comparing the arrival of Aramco in Saudi Arabia to Aeneas arrival in Italy and founding Rome.
[149] "Island of Allah" Bows - Review, *New York Times*, June 1956, https://www.nytimes.com/1956/06/27/archives/island-of-allah-bows.html?smid=em-share
[150] Ibid.

Aramco's Garden

This crude, fictionalised image of Arabia as a land mired in antiquity was not, of course, originally of Aramco's making. Rather, as we have seen before, the company's public relations strategists would incorporate, perpetuate, and redirect existing cultural discourses and imageries, within the construction of their own corporate narratives. Before the first company man set foot in Saudi Arabia, a crude, orientalised picture of Arabia had already become cemented within the Western imaginary. The extent to which Aramco public relations wished to capitalise on western orientalism in their depictions of Saudi Arabia can be seen in two telling changes that were made to *Island of Allah* for its 1956 Western release, from its Arabic progenitor of the previous year (Jazirat al-`Arab).

First, renaming the film 'Island of Allah' constituted an unambiguous reference to Robert Hitchens' 1904 novel *The Garden of Allah.* The story, recounting the tale of doomed love affair set amongst the sweeping deserts of North Africa, was one of the most successful novels of the early twentieth century and spawned numerous remakes on stage and screen in the coming decades.[151] The formative impact that *The Garden of Allah* had on collective cultural understandings of the Middle East in the first half of the twentieth century cannot be overstated. The novel's "heavy-handed subtext about the stifling nature of 'civilized' society and the invigorating experience of 'primitive' and untrammelled culture" which pervades it became irrevocably fused, within the American collective imagination, to the sweeping deserts of the Middle East.[152] As Holly Edwards explains, so recognisable was this aesthetic, that 'The Garden of Allah' became "reduced to a single phrase … a phrase that echoed loudly in popular culture for decades."[153] This was the cultural coding that Aramco sought to invoke with its referential 'Island of Allah' title. To an American audience, the connotations would have been clear. The Arabia of "fantasy and escapism, in the mode of the Arabian Nights" that was conjured by reference to *The Garden of Allah,* was then populated on screen with a parade of figures from Arabia's ancient, mythic past.[154] The combined effect was surely to reinforce the notion of Arabia as a sensationalized counterpoint to modern civilization. Indeed, if any ambiguity remained about the brand of crude orientalism the company was

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[151] Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 43.
[152] Holly Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures,* 44.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Edwards, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures,* 23.

peddling with *Island of Allah*, it was quickly dispelled through the introduction of the second change made to the Jazirat al-`Arab version. Western viewers were treated to the inclusion of an "Arabian dancing girl – exotic of course", despite this cameo bearing no discernible relevance to the plot.[155]

From West to East

Aramco's representation of Saudi Arabia, particularly in its showpiece projects *Discovery!* and the *Island of Allah*, served to bolster the narratives that it sought to construct around its role in the kingdom. Aramco conveyed an image of an antiquated and liminal kingdom, imbued with the orientalised clichés of Arabian mysticism. Such a depiction dramatized the dichotomy between the modernity of the west and the ancient East, and the profundity of the modernizing impact that Aramco's agents brought with them to the Gulf. Thus, while the depiction of the Arabian frontier, differed from those of the classical depictions of the trans-Mississippi frontier, the tacit picture of a land and a culture ripe for the arrival of modernity was nonetheless clear in Aramco's depictions. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, in the Aramco narrative:

> *"Al-Hasa was a frontier made not with axe and gun and individual initiative over a period of generations, but with the organized industrial and engineering skill of the 20th century over a period of months"*[156]

[155] "Island of Allah" Bows - Review, *New York Times*, June 1956, https://www.nytimes.com/1956/06/27/archives/island-of-allah-bows.html?smid=em-share
[156] Stegner, *Discovery*, 86.

Section 3: Tinkerers and Gadgeteers

We have seen in the first section of this chapter that Aramco sought to construct its self-image as a progressive, modernizing force in Saudi Arabia by utilizing the 'language' of developmentalism. The development focus set out in the Point Four programme, which formed a primary focus of United States foreign policy throughout the Cold War period, was the model on which the company consciously modelled its own supposed development ethos. Indeed, aside from the desired-for legitimacy and credibility lent to the Aramco venture by articulating its development role within the framework of broader United States foreign policy, the specific paradigm of Point Four-style development was also one that provided an inherent justificatory logic for the company's continuing presence in the kingdom – a dynamic of technological paternalism. Just as prescribed in the doctrine of Point Four, Aramco would base its developmentalist posture on a paternalistic narrative of providing Western technological and industrial expertise to a hitherto undeveloped Saudi nation.

Within this section, we shall see how narratives of technological expertise and paternalism were supported and propagated through Aramco's public relations production. We will also see how, in stark contrast to *its* presentation of pre-Aramco Saudi Arabia, the company would seek to inextricably tie its corporate image to the notion of technological (and industrial) expertise. It was in this vein that the company sought to create legitimizing narratives for its continuing stewardship of Saudi oil. Aramco's self-embodiment of intrinsically Western industrial and technological nous was projected through its public relations output to imbue dominant cultural understandings of the company, and its Saudi operations, with a sense of legitimacy.

'A Revolution of *Things*':

The company mythology that Aramco fashioned for itself unsurprisingly emphasized the company's guiding role in "Saudi Arabia's astonishing push toward modernization".[157] Indeed, as we have already seen, the formative role that the company asserted for itself in both the development of the kingdom's oil industry, and the Saudi state more generally, was founded on tacit notions of American cultural and industrial supremacy. This implicit superiority was, to a large extent, based upon a vision of Western modernity that Aramco represented, with all its technological and material trappings.

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[157] Stegner, *Discovery*, 43.

The prominence of this technological dimension to Aramco's corporate imagery was consistent throughout Aramco's public relations materials. In *Discovery!,* for example, Stegner repeatedly characterizes the early Aramco men as "tinkerers and gadgeteers" (he uses this phrase on 6 different occasions within Chapter 2 alone)[158] and emphasizes the allure of the "the things this crowd of tinkerers, mechanics, and gadgeteers brought with them" to the Gulf.[159] The civilizing logics that pervade Stegner's allegorical depiction of Saudi Arabia as a neo-frontier are, more than once, expressed in explicitly technological terms:

> *"The products of the tinkerers and gadgeteers' society become absolutely indispensable as soon as they are known. There is no resisting them. Industrial civilization made its way among the Indians of North America in the form of needles, awls, knives, axes, guns, woolen cloth."*[160]

Stegner's depiction of these 'tinkerers and gadgeteers', and the technology and material luxuries that they brought with them to the Middle East, implies an essentializing view of such *things* as inherent features of Western civilization. Within this cultural dialectic between East and West, antiquity and modernity, modern technologies are presented as the preserve of Western culture. In a similar vein, *Desert Venture* presents the Aramco pioneers as a continuation of the "men who all throughout history have done such foolhardy things as believing that steam could run an engine … or that a voice could carry over a wire".[161]

Technological Paternalism

Such depictions serve to present an intrinsic relationship between the men of Aramco and the attainment of modern industrial society in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, in *Discovery!* the two are often presented as one and the same. For instance, in describing the journey of one Aramco employee's wife across the desert, Stegner writes that "after seven days of disguise Anita met the 20th century again in the form of eleven young Americans."[162] This contrast, and the 'attainment', is heightened by the projection of the antiquated nature of Saudi Arabian society in Aramco public relations materials. Aramco, and the group of American men that

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[158] Stegner, *Discovery*, 31-46.
[159] Stegner, *Discovery*, 44.
[160] Stegner, *Discovery*, 46.
[161] "Desert Venture," 10:15.
[162] Stegner, *Discovery*, 136.

represented it in the kingdom, thus stood as the bestowers of modernity who had "reared a modern community on the desert."[163]

This central dynamic was the same one that pervaded Aramco's representation of the modernization and development projects it undertook in the kingdom discussed in the first section of this chapter – of Aramco's indispensability to modernization processes in Saudi Arabia. In his extensive analysis of Aramco's medical programmes in the kingdom (another facet of its development and modernization slate), Chad Parker has argued that "through the transmission of medical technology and culture", Aramco were able to create a sense of dependence on its technical expertise.[164] This dynamic of technological paternalism, ascribed by Parker, in fact seems largely consistent with the company's general developmentalist image within the kingdom, predicated as it was, on the provision of western technological expertise.

The modern technologies of western irrigation on show at the al-Kharj farms project, for instance, provided Aramco's public relations strategists with a potent symbol through which to demonstrate the company's supposed modernizing impact in Saudi Arabia. The railway project carried similar symbolic resonance in this regard. In 1951, Aramco ran an image of a Saudi man on a camel watching the passing of a steam locomotive. The caption that accompanied the image made the intended symbolism unmistakeable: "an ancient form of transportation gives the right of way to a new diesel electric of the Saudi Government Railroad."[165] In affixing its public image to such projects, Aramco sought to lay claim to the very modernity that it stood for.

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[163] "Desert Venture," 15:48.
[164] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 12.
[165] "Tracks in the Sand," Aramco World, April 1951, 1, 7; "Railroad Opened," *Aramco World*, November 1951, 12; cited in Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 12.

Chapter 2: Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have seen how Aramco utilized narratives of development and modernization to narrate its presence in Saudi Arabia, framing its role in the kingdom as one of development and uplift, as opposed to one of exploitation.

First, the company's representation of several highly publicized development initiatives allowed it to cast itself in the role of 'partners in growth' within the kingdom as a whole; with the al-Kharj model farms project constituting a particularly instructive example as to the company's representational strategies in this context. Indeed, at al-Kharj, much like in other projects, both the company's contribution to the project, and the overall modernizing impact of the project, were drastically exaggerated. Nonetheless they were much vaunted in Aramco's public relations materials, rendering the projects more performative than transformative in the context of development.

Through emphasizing its role in such projects, Aramco attempted to shape a legitimizing narrative for its Saudi operations, positioning itself as a benevolent and progressive force in the kingdom rather than simply an exploitative, foreign business interest. Once more this posture was couched in the company's assertion of institutional exceptionalism, supposedly informed by and reflective of its enlightened industrial philosophy and its missionary ethos. Furthermore, Aramco consistently sought to express its own 'development' role within a broader context of developmentalism which formed a prominent part of United States foreign policy throughout the cold war decades; utilizing the culturally resonant language of 'Point Four'. In doing so it was able to contextualize its development role in American and global imaginaries, lending prestige and legitimacy to its self-styled 'private Point Four programme' and once more align itself with United States foreign policy objectives.

We then saw how Aramco's justificatory narrative of development was underpinned by its representation of Saudi Arabia itself, particularly within American culture. Through presenting the kingdom as an ancient and liminal environment, infused with pre-existent tropes of American orientalism, it underlined the necessity of its modernization role in restoring the ancient glories of a long 'eclipsed' kingdom. Indeed, in stark contrast to the antiquated picture of Saudi Arabia projected by the company, Aramco and its agents were portrayed as modernity manifest. Stegner's depiction of the Aramco 'tinkerers and gadgeteers' is indicative of how the company sought to underline its importance to modernization through representing itself as intrinsically tied to the technologies that

facilitated it. These dichotomized depictions also emphasized in its representation of show-case modernization projects such as the al-Kharj project, rendered a stylized image of Aramco's role in Saudi Arabia which dramatized the technological superiority of the 'modern west' in relation to the 'ancient east'. In so doing Aramco imbued cultural understandings of its presence in the kingdom with a distinct sense of technological paternalism, which once more framed its role in Saudi Arabia as a kind of civilizing mission.

Chapter 3: For King and Company

Up to this point, the focus has predominantly been on the transmission of such messaging to the western audiences of the English-speaking world, with limited reference to aspects of cultural production directed at the Arab world.

In this section, we shall turn to examine how public relations strategies helped to define the company's relationship with two groups that were of paramount importance to its position within the kingdom itself: the Saudi Monarchy and Aramco's in-country labour force. On a global level, Aramco's public relations were a crucial component of its 'partnership' with the royal family, transmitting a distinct cultural image of the House of Saud as a means of 'corporate diplomacy'. Within the kingdom, the strategies of narrative creation and cultural manipulation through which Aramco had sought to influence external prevalent cultures were turned inward toward its own labour force. In so doing, the company sought to foster a distinct 'corporate culture' with which to maintain its hegemonic position in Saudi Arabian industry.

Section 1: The King:

From the outset, the paradigm of Aramco's enlightened foreign industrial practice was expressed as a 'partnership'. This oft-invoked "Arabian American partnership" denoted the essence of this 'enlightened' approach; the company role in the kingdom was as a dedicated agent of progress and development, acting in close partnership with its visionary sovereign - Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud, conventionally known in the West as Ibn Saud.[166]

The relationship that Aramco held with Ibn Saud and his immediate successors was one of the defining features of the Aramco venture. Parker has posited that, whilst Aramco's PR programme served many functions, "probably most important, it laid the foundation for the company's engagement with the monarchy, whose continued backing Aramco required if it hoped to exploit the kingdom for its riches."[167] Whilst this can be debated, public relations

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[166] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook, 4*.
[167] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*, 15.

certainly constituted an important tool of "corporate diplomacy";[168] and the company went to great efforts to shape the cultural image of Ibn Saud and the Saudi monarchy, through various modes of cultural production, across various geographic scales. As we shall see, such efforts not only ingratiated the company to its royal host, but also addressed key strategic objectives which would buttress the position of both the King and subsequently the company, upon the world stage.

Saudi Arabia's George Washington

As discussed in the historiography section above, the potency of Aramco's efforts to shape understandings of Saudi Arabian history and culture within the United States during the decades after the second world war was a result, in no small part, of the lack of credible alternative sources of information on the kingdom. As a consequence, J.B. Kelly observes, Aramco was, without much difficulty, able to "constitute itself as the interpreter of Saudi Arabia – its people, its history, its culture and, above all, its ruling house – to the United States at large."[169] Through this interpretive role, the company fashioned a distinct narrative of the recent history of Saudi Arabia, through the tale of the man who had forged the kingdom "with the sword held in his good right hand".[170]

The narrative of Ibn Saud as the father of his nation would be a constant theme of Aramco's American public relations output. In 1948, *Desert Venture* reiterated McConnell's adulatory account of two years earlier (quoted above), framing Ibn Saud's conquest of Arabia in the early 20th century as the rise of a "powerful leader … [who] set out to achieve a renaissance", restoring his dynastic house, and the region to which it claimed the right to rule, to its former glories.[171] The martial valour of Ibn Saud, through which he unified his Arabian kingdom, was repeatedly emphasized. Most sensationally, *Island of Allah* depicted the numerous battles of this conquest, climaxing with the daring capture of Riyadh in 1902 in which Ibn Saud and 40 of his men were depicted scaling the city walls.[172] Yet tales of his daring exploits could be found throughout Aramco's public relations materials.[173]

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[168] Parker, *Making the Desert Modern*: "corporate diplomacy" is a phrase repeatedly used by Parker to describe the function of Aramco's public relations narratives, as well as their various development programmes.
[169] J.B Kelly, Arabia, the Gulf, and the West, 257.
[170] "The Saudi Arabian Partnership", by Phil McConnell, 1944, cited in: Vitalis *America's Kingdom*, 78-79.
[171] "Desert Venture," 4:02.
[172] "The Island of the Arabs," Aramco Expats, accessed June 23, 2024, https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/the-island-of-the-arabs/.
[173] See for example, the extended account of the capture of Riyadh in the Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook,* 63-65.

More than just a heroic warrior king however, Aramco were at great pains to convey the *innate* goodness of its royal partner. In *Discovery!,* for instance, Stegner makes multiple references to the fact that "the [Aramco] people who knew him felt that King Ibn Saud would have been a great man no matter where or in what circumstances he had been born"; this sense of admiration and veneration was ubiquitous across Aramco's public relations in the U.S.[174] His unification of his kingdom was presented as inherently righteous, expressed in the language of 'nation building', so familiar in the American political lexicon. Indeed, in Aramco's telling, the kingly virtues of Ibn Saud were numerous:

> *"The king has built his country within his lifetime … [H]e has cared for it and has held it by his own strength and wisdom… [H]e is no furtive sheikh, swiftly raiding and as swiftly withdrawing. He has been first a general, then a diplomat, and finally an administrator who has exhibited a keen sense regarding the relation between his desert people and the march of the world around him".*[175]

Ultimately, the image of Ibn Saud which the company sought to project into American culture was that of a man uniquely disposed for rule; a George Washington-like figure who was at the same time conquering hero, great politician, and statesman. The grandiose tone of the company's depictions is captured in Stegner's description of "the Saudi Arabian King whose legend lay from the Red Sea to the Gulf like the shadow of a colossus."[176]

The Arabists of the company's Arabian Affairs Division in Dhahran also contributed to several denser, 'academic' accounts of Saudi Arabian history produced in the U.S. and in Europe, which provided a similarly gushing picture of Aramco's esteemed 'partner' in development, and of his noble line.[177] Indeed, Kelly notes that, in such accounts "all considerations of objectivity, balance and a proper regard for factual evidence were subordinated to the aim of hymning the 'right praise and true perfection' of the House of Saud. Its dynastic importance was inflated, its virtues extolled, its exploits celebrated, its excesses concealed, and its rivals calumniated."[178]

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[174] Stegner, *Discovery*, 72.
[175] "The Saudi Arabian Partnership", by Phil McConnell, 1944, cited in: Vitalis *America's Kingdom*, 78-79.
[176] Stegner, *Discovery,* 140.
[177] Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West*, 257.
[178] Ibid.

The benefits accrued by Aramco from these prodigious image-making efforts were manifold. As we shall soon see, there was a distinct geo-political utility to these kinds of constructed narratives, which meant that Aramco's obliging creation of them represented a valued functional aspect of its 'partnership' with the Saudi Monarchy. However, in addition, it was critical for the company's own image in the States and beyond, to fashion such a glowing image of the House of Saud. Not only did emphasizing the sovereignty of Ibn Saud and his successors, aid in refuting the familiar accusations of economic imperialism, but it also acted to counter uncomfortable questions as to why a company which so insistently proclaimed its enlightened American ideals, had entered into partnership with one of the world's 'unenlightened' autocracies. Aramco thus sought to construct a figure of unquestionable dignity and legitimacy – and they were clearly, to some degree, successful. When British Prime Minister Anthony Eden visited Washington in 1956 to discuss Saudi aggression in a border dispute with British affiliated Oman over the Buraimi Oasis, he was solemnly informed by Eisenhower that in the U.S, 'people in general … tended to think that the whole Arabian Peninsula belonged, or ought to belong, to King Saud.'[179]

Heirs to an Ancient Civilization:

The gilded image of the House of Saud, and the presumed legitimacy of its sovereign authority in the Arabian Peninsula, that Aramco endeavoured to inculcate within American culture, was in fact consistent with a broader, global public relations strategy. As we saw in Chapter 1, Aramco expanded its public relations scope throughout the 1950's, to encompass the 'Arab world' as well as the English-speaking world, in response to mounting political threats in the region. In particular, the rising tide of pan-Arabism represented an existential threat to the position of both Aramco and its royal patron. Indeed, Vitalis asserts that the original impetus for *Jazirat al-Arab* (*Island of the Arabs*) was Aramco's desire to project counter-narratives to the mounting campaigns by Arab republican governments, led by the example of Nasser and Egypt's influential *Voice of the Arabs* radio station.[180] Arab nationalist critiques identified Arabia as "Arabism's weak flank in its struggle with imperialism" – in the thrall of western oil firms and their affiliated governments, constituting

[179] Cited in Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf, and the West*, 257.
[180] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 121.

little more than an incoherent collection of "tribes with flags" in the context of Pan-Arab political and cultural identity.[181]

It was in this political context that the film (and its English counterpart *Island of Allah*) was conceived; and it is in this context that its episodic march through the collective history of Arab civilization, before recounting the daring exploits of Ibn Saud's conquest of much of the Arabian Peninsula, must be understood.[182] In presenting the latter within the clear linear sequence of the former, Aramco's Arabists and public relations strategists sought to present Saudi Arabia as the cradle of Arabian history, and the House of Saud as both the rightful inheritors of this history and as distinguished leaders in the contemporary Arab world. In this light, Stegner's description of Ibn Saud's retinue as "'a mighty caravan of the proportions of a crusade, or a counter crusade" which "Saladin…might have headed"[183]; or which "might have been a camp of the host of Sennacherib", takes on new semiotic resonance.[184] Thus, the imagery of the 'glorious [Arabian] past' which pervaded Aramco's constructed imagery of Saudi Arabia can be seen to perform a second, important narrative function – it projected an air of ancient legitimacy and prestige on the House of Saud within the western and Arabic worlds.

Thus, Aramco's image making efforts on the Saudi Crown's behalf, can be seen to represent a potent, and multi-faceted, tool of 'corporate diplomacy'. Such efforts shaped a positive public image of Ibn Saud and his descendants in the United States, which was, for a long time, almost unchallenged in shaping political American discourses pertaining to the Saudi Monarchy. Moreover, in the geopolitical arena, Aramco's public relations efforts served to bolster the position of the monarchy against the emergent pan-Arabist movements that posed an existential threat to both King and company.

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[181] Ibid.
[182] "The Island of the Arabs," Aramco Expats, accessed June 23, 2024, https://www.aramcoexpats.com/articles/the-island-of-the-arabs/.
[183] Stegner, *Discovery*, 136.
[184] Stegner, *Discovery*, 139.

Section 2: Corporate Cultures of Control:

While Aramco endeavoured to shape perceptions of its royal partners upon the world stage, labour unrest, along with populist elements within the Saudi government, continued to present a consistent and acute threat to the company's position inside the kingdom throughout the post-war decades.

Vitalis argues that the company's response to was to defer to the Monarchy for the "control and discipline of its workers … fe[eling] they could largely ignore worker demands, having passed the obligation to the Crown, and in effect to resolve their own industrial relations difficulties by being completely solicitous to the Crown and Crown intrigues".[185] It was certainly the case that Aramco's royal partners acted as the primary enforcers of discipline. Mostly at the behest of the company, the Saudi government repeatedly deported workers from neighbouring countries, and imprisoned Saudi nationals, who were identified as organisers and 'troublemakers'.[186]

However, while the company was happy to prevail upon the government to perform the heavy lifting when it came to the draconian application of discipline, this did not necessarily mean that it made *no* attempts to maintain control of its labour force. In fact, there was at least one faction of Aramco employees upon whom management made significant attempts to exert influence and control. The cohort of American employees working in Saudi Arabia which, as we have seen, comprised the lion's share of middle-management positions as late as the 1970s, were unsurprisingly seen as a key consideration in the context of industrial relations. As such, the company went to considerable lengths to ensure that this crucial faction toed the 'party line'. As we have seen, the company made it clear that it expected its American employees to fulfil their "public relations responsibility", which involved conveying the company line to the Saudi Arabs with whom they came contact in the course during their daily routines.[187] Thus, *pace* Vitalis, the company did not entirely pass the obligation of industrial relations to the Crown. Rather, it sought to employ the same strategies of narrative manipulation utilized in influencing external collective cultures in the construction of an internal corporate culture in in Saudi Arabia.

Through examination of the *Aramco Handbook,* we can glean a clear and extensive understanding of the ideational content of this corporate culture, and the narratives with

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[185] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 150-156.
[186] Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 106-07.
[187] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Armaco Handbook,* 221.

which it sought to shape the views of its American employees 'on the ground' in the kingdom. Specifically, we can see how this culture was employed as an industrial relations tool, and as a countermeasure against opposition to Aramco's hegemonic grip on Saudi oil production. Indeed, the prominent consideration given in the composition of the *Aramco Handbook* to countering political and industrial opposition becomes abundantly clear on first reading. In the very opening section, setting out the "purpose of this handbook", the authors allege that "misunderstandings" were one of the most fundamental problems faced by the company.[188]

Labour Relations:

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Arabian Affairs Division responsible for the production of the Aramco handbooks, was created in direct response to the first episode of labour unrest that engulfed the company in 1945. Indeed, the "symptoms of discontent" amongst the company's native labour force, due to poor working conditions and prejudicial treatment, was a consistent feature of Aramco's industrial relations throughout the post war decades.[189] Yet within the *Handbook*, the company's management framed labour unrest as being born of the 'misunderstandings' that it was designed to redress. Employing the familiar language of exceptionalism, the validity of the "unsavoury reputation" acquired by industry in the past was acknowledged, but the *Handbook* went on to claim that exploitative and arbitrary treatment of workers were a remnant of "a sordid picture of mechanized industry in the nineteenth century", asserting that Aramco's new, enlightened industrial philosophy was free from such characterisations.[190] The *Handbook* thus stressed the need "to overcome the feeling that persists, with much justification in previous experience, that there is a fundamental conflict between labour and management."[191] Such anachronistic critiques which had led the "uniformed and cynical" to persist in the belief that Aramco's "management [was] concerned only with profit" were "miss[ing] what is perhaps the most significant aspect of the changing complexion of modern industry."[192] The changed complexion that Aramco represented, it insisted, was as one of "more enlightened labour leaders … working toward greater mutual confidence and collaboration in the interests of all".[193]

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[188] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook, 1-2.*
[189] Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*, 158-61.
[190] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook, 92.*
[191] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 96.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid.

Ideological Culture

The tenets of this 'enlightened' approach were helpfully codified within the *Handbook* itself, with much of its content expressed in prescriptive ideological terms. The *Handbook* thus describes the company's commitment to the American "dedicat[ion] to an ideal of equality of opportunity … [which] carries into the industrial philosophy known as free enterprise or capitalism."[194] The "rapid progress" witnessed in the United States was to be held up "as an example of what can be done where conditions provide the incentives, the personal freedom and the security needed to stimulate the enterprise and ingenuity of which people are capable."[195]

Modern American capitalism then, was presented as a clear, prescriptive model for Saudi Arabia (and other 'developing' countries) to follow; one which had delivered the 'highest general standard of living in the world today or ever before", and "also afforded a practical way of giving effect to the political ideal of a greater degree of equality among men."[196] Such appeals seem in line with the logic of what Michael Latham describes as the 'normative' model of *modernization theory* which was becoming increasingly prominent in the United States during the early years of the Cold War.[197] American social scientists and policy makers in this period were insisting upon the need to provide 'underdeveloped' countries with a tangible alternative to the 'revolutionary appeals' of communism, and an image of American modernization was offered up as a clear model for such countries to follow.[198] Aramco therefore emphasized the "revolutionary" impact "upon human relations, human welfare, and living standards" offered by its model of free enterprise capitalism, as an alternative to the communist elements which the company believed (with some justification) to be informing much of the organised labour opposition against it in the kingdom.[199]

> *"What the future pages of history will have to say about the outcome of forces presently at work in the Middle East may depend, at least in part, upon how fair a chance the oil companies have to demonstrate the advantages of free enterprise in their own key*

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[194] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 92.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Michael Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S Foreign policy From the Cold War to Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 48.
[198] Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution,* 48-49.
[199] Vitalis, America's Kingdom, 156-157.

industry over a period of time and upon the wisdom with which they practice the principles they believe in."[200]

Nationalism and Nationalisation

The 'forces' at play in the region, as we have seen, dominated the thinking of the public relations strategists of the Arabian Affairs Division throughout most of the period prior to nationalisation. Clearly, Arab Nationalism was deemed one of the primary sources of the ambiguous 'misunderstandings' to which the *Handbook* repeatedly referred; and to which it was necessary to provide 'proper perspective'.

As with the *Handbook's* assessment of labour opposition, Arab Nationalism's antipathy to western presence in the Middle East was acknowledged, yet asserted to be derived from historical experiences with no relevance to Aramco's contemporary operations; a product of the "memory of retreating vestiges of European 'imperialism'".[201] Thus, whilst the "bitter resentment in Arab minds" toward such imperial elements was understandable, such sentiments were being perniciously misapplied to Aramco's modern, enlightened operations in Saudi Arabia, "provid[ing] an emotional chord for subversive and ambitious elements to play on."[202]

In clear reference to the nationalist critiques of Arab republican governments, such sentiments had represented an opportunity that "these elements have taken full advantage of", being weaponized by these political movements: "their most common devices for furthering their own aims have been agitation and propaganda fostering suspicion and hostility."[203] The model for progress and modernization which Aramco represented was, the company alleged, subject to deliberate misinformation campaigns by nationalist Arab leaders, such as Nasser: "as used by the Communists, these devices tend to distract attention from their own subjugation of foreign peoples and their imperialistic designs to control the world."[204]

Critically, the policy of nationalisation, universally advocated by such political movements and so feared by the western firms, was subsequently portrayed as a tool of the pernicious, imperial designs of the aforementioned 'subversive' elements. In the Aramco worldview, set out in the *Handbook*, free enterprise was the clear and undeniable logic of

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[200] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 8.
[201] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 8.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 11.
[204] Ibid.

human progress, and the misguided supposition that "governments can do the job better … history ha[d] consistently proven this to be false.[205]

Just as we saw in Chapter 1, Aramco expressed the core paradigm of modern industry that the company represented as an inherent force for good in the world. This typically hyperbolic framing was indicative of the kind of zealous, and dogmatic perspective with which it sought to imbue its institutional culture in the kingdom. As the malign political forces in the region, and their affiliated populist elements within the kingdom "[were] attempting to destroy stability, free enterprise, and human freedom itself, it was an absolute imperative, Aramco claimed, that they be 'given the chance to demonstrate the advantages' of their model".[206] Political and industrial turmoil could not therefore be tolerated, as it jeopardized the undeniable progress that companies like Aramco were supposedly facilitating in the region:

> *"The countries of the Middle East whose economies are being revitalized with the help of oil revenues and advanced technology need a long period of political stability in order to permit the forces of evolutionary progress to run their course."*[207]

Chapter 3: Conclusion:

Aramco's public relations activities formed a crucial part of its engagement with the Saudi Royal family, fulfilling many important functions in their 'partnership'. First, through both direct and indirect modes of cultural production, Aramco was able to fashion a positive image for the Saudi Monarchy within American culture. Framed as a heroic, father of the nation type figure in the Washington mould, Aramco succeeded in creating a highly valorised picture of Ibn Saud's kingship, presenting him (and his heirs by extension) as worthy, legitimate rulers of their kingdom. Through such depictions, not only did Aramco ingratiate itself to the king by boosting his international prestige, by it also circumscribed questions about its involvement, and indeed the US Government's involvement, with a despotic foreign monarchy. Simultaneously, to a global audience, the depiction of the House of Saud as heirs to the historic legacy of Arab civilization was designed to bolster its cultural image in the face of criticism and attack from pan-Arab movements.

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[205] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 11.
[206] Lebkicher, Rentz and Steineke, *Aramco Handbook,* 8.
[207] Ibid.

Whilst Aramco's public relations on a global scale facilitated its relationship with the rulers of Saudi Arabia, the company employed similar techniques of cultural manipulation on a more localized scale to aid in the control of its labour force within the kingdom itself. Despite repeated insistence that its role in the kingdom was "industrial rather than political", we have seen how Aramco sought to fashion a corporate culture imbued with a clear ideological position. inherently political strategy, designed to make true believers of the cohort of American staff working in the kingdom. It was then strongly implied that these corporate 'missionaries' should further disseminate this ideologically infused culture through their interactions with the native Saudi workforce. Here we can see the logic of cultural hegemony in microcosm, with the company seeking to shape and define the way which its American workers, and by extension its Saudi workers, viewed company operations and the political and industrial dynamics that informed them.

In the creation of this corporate culture, Aramco relied upon the same narratives that pervaded its external public relations output, impressing the uniquely enlightened mode of American free enterprise that the company represented, as well as framing its operations in the language of corporate mission. Indeed, in the hyperbolic narrative of the Aramco corporate culture, the company were the defenders of these enlightened values, against pernicious forces that threatened not only the company, but also the progress of both the Saudi nation and even the free world.

Whilst the notion of 'corporate cultures' has become something of a pithy cliché in modern Western societies, in the context of Aramco's position in Saudi Arabia during the post war period, the notion takes on an altogether different meaning. As a dominant industrial entity operating in conjunction with an authoritarian state, the culture Aramco sought to inculcate within its Saudi operations appears an altogether more potent, and sinister proposition. This was a mechanism of control.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has sought to understand how Aramco utilized cultural production techniques of public relations to shape collective perceptions of its operations in Saudi Arabia. As we have seen, throughout this period the company's public relations output encompassed a number of distinct yet interrelated narrative themes, and mediums of dissemination, through which it sought to exert influence upon cultural imaginaries. Over the course of the three preceding chapters, we have examined three defining themes of Aramco's cultural production through which it sought to shape collective perceptions and cultural understandings of its operations, in order to legitimize its presence within Saudi Arabia and circumscribe cultural opposition to the company which may have threatened its dominant position within the global oil economy.

In the first chapter, we saw how Aramco sought to construct a cultural identity of exceptionalism. Co-opting existing preconceptions of American exceptionalism, Aramco fashioned an institutional image predicated upon a supposedly enlightened, conscionable approach to their foreign industrial practices, as well as a profound sense of *mission*. Through cultivating this institutional image within pervasive cultural understandings, particularly in the United States, Aramco formed an assumptive base through which many would conceive of their operations in Saudi Arabia. In this light, the Aramco venture was to be perceived as a project of mutual benefit and uplift for the Saudi kingdom and its people, exempt from notions of exploitation and economic imperialism. Simultaneously, represented as a distinctly American institution in character and virtue, Aramco's corporate *mission* was represented as intrinsically aligned with the 'national interest'. A further layer of cultural legitimacy was thus rendered by the presentation of Aramco's *trusteeship* over Saudi oil production, for the good of the American nation and the 'free world'.

Closely associated with this identity of exceptionalism and the enlightened corporate virtues that underpinned it, Aramco sought to formulate the cultural narrative of its industrial operation in Saudi Arabia around the themes of development and modernization. Indeed, in contrast to the exploitation and avarice of previous, imperial forms of foreign resource extraction, Aramco asserted its purported role within the kingdom as a partner in growth and development. This philanthropic posture was consciously articulated within the broader context of American developmentalism, around which U.S foreign policy was widely orientated in the Cold War period.

Moreover, Aramco's developmentalism was articulated through stylized assertions of technological superiority, and the promised transmission of western technological modernity. Through various means of cultural production, Aramco propagated contrasting images of Saudi Arabian antiquity, and modern American industrial civilization, with Aramco depicted as paragons of technological modernity. Such depictions served to dramatize the transformative modernizing impact that Aramco asserted to be having on Saudi Arabia, as well as imbuing cultural perspectives of the company's relationship with the kingdom and its infrastructure with a sense of technological paternalism. This technological paternalism dynamic provided a justificatory narrative for their continuing role within Saudi industry and economy, inextricably linking the image of Aramco the actualization of industrial modernization in Saudi Arabia within cultural imaginaries.

Finally, the ways in which Aramco utilized similar methods of cultural production, to define its relationship with both the Saudi monarchy, and its labour force within the kingdom, is indicative of the diverse array of applications of Aramco's multifaceted public relations programme. Much like they had with their own institutional image, the company forged a highly stylized, adulatory image of the House of Saud within the American cultural imaginary, which served to present the succession of Saudi despots in a manner palatable

or even appealing to an American audience. Due to their near monopoly that the company established in regard to cultural production of modern Saudi Arabian history in the post war period, the company laid the cultural foundations for popular acquiescence to a decades long US-Saudi relationship. Meanwhile, in addition to the prodigious outward projection of Aramco's desired narratives and image upon public imaginaries, the company also directed the logic of cultural hegemony within its own institutional structure. Indeed, within the kingdom, the company sought to construct a hermetic corporate culture, designed to govern the thoughts and actions of its American employees in relation to the company. The incumbent 'public relations responsibility' of this American cohort was then emphasized, prescribing the need to further disseminate the Aramco *culture* to the Saudi workforce, and wider indeed the wider Saudi Arabian populace. In this way, the proper 'perspective' of the political and industrial dynamics was to be transmitted to the Aramco labour force, to try and circumscribe the political threats to the company's position.

The combined sum of these respective strands of Aramco's public relations have been an elaborate and lasting imprint on collective cultural understandings of Aramco, and the practices of foreign extractive industry that they represent.

Relation to Existing Literature

Building on the work of Vitalis, and Parker to a lesser extent, this analysis has sought to redress the dearth of research specifically focused on Aramco, a corporate entity with a historical resonance matched by few other in the context of twentieth century global history. Moreover, in seeking to provide a detailed exegesis of Aramco's played in defining its own narrative of exceptionalism, this analysis has contributed to the pioneering work of Vitalis in demonstrating the fallacy of such narratives, which still pervades the historiography of middle eastern oil.

Moreover, this analysis demonstrates the valuable and unique case study that Aramco provides for research on the evolution of corporate public relations strategies in the twentieth century. The illuminating work conducted by Marchland, Ewen, and others, have rightly pointed to the distinctly American origins of modern public relations, and have such focused on their application within a domestic American cultural environment. However, during this period, the American oil firms which comprised an important segment of the American corporate arena were also playing a dominant role in geo-politics. As such, American oil majors, such as those who owned Aramco, were amongst the first to apply such methods on an international scope. This added dimension makes Aramco a fascinating, and seminal case study in this field.

Limitations and Future Research:

The above analysis of course carries a certain degree of subjectivity, in trying to ascribe precise motives and design to Aramco's cultural production. As mentioned in the introduction, access to documentary evidence, such as internal company correspondence and the like would thus further elucidate the strategic designs that shaped the formulation of Aramco's public relations programme. Nonetheless, the consistency of the themes within the body of source material available, as well as the degree to which they reflect wider pervasive cultural tropes such as American exceptionalism and developmentalism, provide clear indication of the conscious construction of Aramco's cultural image around these core themes. Moreover, access to key pieces of source material which are not currently widely available, such as a full copy of Island of Allah would allow for an even richer understanding of the nuances of Aramco's cultural production.

In terms of future research, an analysis of the public relations materials that Aramco produced in Arabic and disseminated throughout the Arab world compliment the analysis conducted here. Indeed, this would provide a more holistic appraisal of the global scale of

Aramco's cultural production attempts and reveal distinctions in messaging reflecting distinctions in the respective cultural imaginaries that Aramco sought to influence in its unique role as an American owned subsidiary operating in the Middle East.

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Abbreviations:

Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO)

Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL)

Standard Oil of New Jersey's (SONJ)

British Petroleum (BP)

Iraq Petroleum Company (IIP)

Anglo Iranian Oil Company (AIOC)

Arabian Affairs Division (AAD).