



**Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive**  
**DSpace Repository**

---

Faculty and Researchers

Faculty and Researchers Collection

---

2011

**Book Review: The Quest: Energy, Security,  
and the Remaking of the Modern World**  
written by Daniel Yergin

Looney, Robert

---

Middle East Journal

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/40887>

*Downloaded from NPS Archive: Calhoun*



Calhoun is a project of the Dudley Knox Library at NPS, furthering the precepts and goals of open government and government transparency. All information contained herein has been approved for release by the NPS Public Affairs Officer.

**Dudley Knox Library / Naval Postgraduate School**  
**411 Dyer Road / 1 University Circle**  
**Monterey, California USA 93943**

<http://www.nps.edu/library>

book ostensibly about war. Perhaps the nearest comparison this reviewer could think of is Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving Atocha Station*, which is also about the comprehensibility of our sometimes ugly world and the ability of poetry to reflect, affect, or engage it. In other words, Caton ponders big questions without being ponderous. Published in 2005, the book retains its relevance in the era of the "Arab Spring," bringing depth to contemporary reports of social change. While centered on linguistic anthropology, *Yemen Chronicle* is also warmly recommended for anyone interested in Yemen, the Arab world more generally, poetry, conflict, or anthropological fieldwork.

*David Crawford, Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Fairfield University*

## ENERGY

**The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World**, by Daniel Yergin. New York: The Penguin Press, 2011. 804 pages. \$37.95.

*Reviewed by Robert Looney*

According to many experts, the world's key energy supplies are being rapidly depleted and will soon be exhausted. To these authorities the phenomenon of peak oil — a maximum level of production that will soon be reached only to fall off quickly — is gaining currency and is looming on the horizon. More troubling to this school of thought is the harsh realization that the world is simply not prepared to make the transition from hydrocarbon sources of energy. Crash programs to develop alternative fuels are needed immediately or the world economy as we know it will be doomed.

Other experts draw a completely different interpretation regarding energy scarcity; they see new technologies opening up vast reserves of hitherto inaccessible supplies of oil and natural gas. If only the government and the environmentalists would get out of the way, we now have the ability to expand our usable energy reserves indefinitely.

No doubt, those unfamiliar with the engineering and technical aspects of the energy sector find it difficult gain a sense as to which interpretation is closer to reality. Confusing the matter even further is the widespread perception that most of the so-called experts have hidden agendas, an ax to grind, or an ideological position to defend.

Fortunately, there is one expert, Daniel Yergin, whose reputation is beyond reproach. Yergin is the Pulitzer Prize author of *The Prize*, a monumental history of oil from its discovery to 1990. *The Quest* starts where *The Prize* left off, and tries to answer the fundamental question: what will the future of energy look like over the next 50 years? To shed light on this critical issue, the reader is led on a fascinating journey through 807 pages that directly confront a series of highly relevant considerations: Is the world rapidly running out of oil? Is natural gas the answer to our growing energy needs? Are the new developments in shale gas capable of postponing the long-feared rapid rise in energy costs? Is global warming the danger leading scientists seem to think it is? Is solar power a realistic alternative? He addresses each one of these issues thoroughly and objectively, and in doing so provides insights that may surprise many, and disappoint others, especially advocates or holders of extreme positions.

First, the intuitive peak oil argument is easily dismissed. As Yergin notes, forecasts of the peak of US domestic production have been repeatedly pushed into the future — output is four times higher than predictions made in the early 1970s. Clearly, technological progress has outrun increasing physical scarcity yielding far more oil from old sources and ones not previously counted upon.

Yergin's view is that the world faces not a peak in production but a plateau that is not likely to be reached for a number of years. The importance of this finding is hard to underestimate, for it throws open to serious question the increasingly popular (and political) notion of the imperative to rapidly develop alternative energy sources.

Second, on the issue of global warming, Yergin offers little encouragement to those who view the issue as a hoax or junk science. Global warming is occurring, and there is lit-

tle doubt it will fundamentally alter many of the patterns we have become accustomed.

Third, talk of a transition from hydrocarbon—based energy sources is premature. No doubt in future years many technologies will become available that will enable the world to transition from fossil fuels. Unfortunately for the present, the renewable technologies that are currently being deployed are highly unlikely to provide enough reliable and cheap energy to replace fossil fuels.

Fourth, there is little doubt that despite new technologies and efforts at conservation the world's use of energy will continue to grow—perhaps at even an accelerating rate if many of today's emerging economies are able to maintain their rapid pace of growth.

At the end, one has to agree with Yergin's conclusion that how the world finds and develops energy will largely define the type of world humanity inhabits. *The Quest* gives us a glimpse of that future and the insights needed to effectively cope with its challenges. Will we be wise enough to heed his assessment before it is too late?

*Robert Looney, Naval Postgraduate School*

## MODERN HISTORY AND POLITICS

**Political Islam: A Critical Reader**, ed. by Frédéric Volpi. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. 471 pages. \$49.95 paper.

*Reviewed by Issa J. Boullata*

“Political Islam” and “Islamism” are used interchangeably in this book to refer to the phenomenon in the contemporary world whereby some present-day Muslims believe that Islam as a faith calls for a specific way to organize society and that they should seek to implement it politically, using violence if needed. This phenomenon has attracted the world's attention, notably since the spectacular 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, with their symbolic effects on international public opinion and the rise of the so-called “war on terror” thereafter. Scholars have studied this phenomenon in

many recent works, concentrating on various aspects of it.

Frédéric Volpi of the University of St. Andrews has done a great service in editing this book by selecting the finest scholarship on the subject published in the last ten years or so. The post-publication events of the Arab Spring in 2011 may call for an emphasis on some notions in this book, but the volume remains a most comprehensive overview of political Islam to date and is of great help to students at all levels, and even to some bewildered politicians and diplomats.

After an enlightening general introduction by Volpi, the book has seven other thematically-arranged sections, each beginning with a sectional introduction by him, followed by several excellent selections from recent journal articles and books by renowned writers on political Islam, and ending with a relevant list of sources for further reading on the section's topic. In turn, each section deals with a specific theme: an explanation of the nature and aims of Islamism, a history of the rise of Islamist groups, a description of the political responses to them, an analysis of how these groups fare in societies where democracy and multiculturalism are the norm, and a description of their resort to political violence and terrorism; after a section discussing the present-day globalization of Islamism, the book ends with an assessment of its future, giving an idea that political Islam, as it readjusts to changing conditions, is not as dire as many suspect.

The 30 essays are interesting to read. The contributors have new things to offer—some by their data based on field research and the latest press; others by their analysis based on the most recent theories of sociology, religious anthropology, and political science; and others by their insights based on long experience and historical investigation. As may be expected, there are diverse points of view, and this makes for enlightening perspectives on the scholars' methods as well as on the complex phenomenon of Islamism in the contemporary world. The lists of sources for further reading after each section are a veritable treasure trove for learners.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.