

If December 7, 1941, is a day that lives in infamy for Americans, how might one describe a less famous date, May 29, 1933? The mating of a blind eagle and a deaf camel, yielding grotesque progeny? The onset of an economic windfall, and an insoluble strategic conundrum? Or was it, at bottom, a British apostate's consummate revenge? With hindsight, the date signified all of the above, and more. The place is Saudi Arabia, less a nation than a corral of tribes lashed together in 1925 by the kingdom's founder, Abdul Aziz Ibn Abdul Rahman Saud, known commonly as Ibn Saud. The venue is the shabby Kazam Palace (the King is cash poor) in Nazla, a suburb of Jiddah. The principal personages at a signing ceremony are Sheik Abdullah Suleiman, the wily royal treasurer, and an affable forty-year-old American lawyer, Lloyd Hamilton, who represents Standard Oil of California (Socal).

Also present are Najib Sallia, the interpreter, and Karl Twitchell, the American mining engineer who with fruitful foresight demarcated the boundaries in a contract that awards Socal exclusive rights for six decades to extract oil from eastern Saudi Arabia (including offshore waters and islands) for £35,000 down, payable in gold, and an additional £20,000 to follow in eighteen months. Of this sum, £10,000 is an outright grant, the balance an advance against anticipated royalties, fixed at four shillings per ton payable in gold. Such are the core elements in what the State Department subsequently calls "the greatest commercial prize in the history of the planet."¹