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Review by **Matthew Shannon**, Emory & Henry College

Claudia Castiglioni has captured much of her recent monograph on the United States and the modernization of Iran during the 1960s in the article under review here. While the monograph pays equal attention to the John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson administrations, the article focuses on the latter to identify the similarities and differences between the policies of the two Democratic presidents. Her objective is to trace the evolution of U.S.-Iran relations from the “hope for reform” of the 1960s to the “military and energy relationship” of the 1970s (491). She argues that Kennedy abandoned the push for reform before his assassination and that the steady sidelining of the reformist drive that occurred during the Johnson years set the stage for the oil-fueled arms build-up that defined the Shah’s last decade in power. The narrative is bookended by events that defined the ‘Development Decade’ in Iran. Between these bookends, Castiglioni’s analysis centers on two questions: What are the continuities and discontinuities between the two Democratic presidents of the 1960s, and when did Iran move from being a U.S. client to a state that enjoyed self-determination on the world stage?

In terms of the first question, Castiglioni rejects the “contraposition between Kennedy’s benign idealism and Johnson’s cautious pragmatism” (493). Here one sees how today’s scholars, with access to archives unopen to previous generations, move beyond the bounds that Barry Rubin and James Bill set in the 1980s. To Bill, the Kennedy-Johnson transition mattered a lot. He argued that the Shah despised the Kennedys but “viewed Johnson as a somewhat crude but kindred spirit,” and that “the American president and the Iranian shah

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developed a close professional relationship.” To Castiglioni, the turnover at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue did not matter much. She quotes administration officials who recalled that Iran “was not at the top of [LBJ’s] agenda nor near the top” (497). That contemporary reality, combined with historical allure of studying more dramatic periods of the binational relationship, is why the “beyond Vietnam” (492) revisionist Johnson scholarship and the “new global challenges” school have largely left Iran in the dark.4

It is her answer to the second question – the question of Iran’s status as a U.S. client – where Castiglioni offers a significant historiographic contribution. This is a question that has interested scholars of Iran for decades, most notably Richard Cottam and Mark Gasiorowski.5 It was also the subject of Roham Alvandi’s recent book, in which he argues that President Richard Nixon (with assists from his top foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger) was unique among American presidents for not treating Iran as a client. To Alvandi, the personal relationship between the heads-of-state, and the monarch’s cunning diplomacy, explain the special relationship of the early 1970s. Castiglioni does not revise Alvandi’s argument as much as she adds to it. As Castiglioni’s title clearly conveys, Iran was “no longer a client” to the Johnson team, but it was “not yet a partner.” Castiglioni redefines the Johnson period as a transition between Kennedy’s assumption that, as Iran’s sole external patron, the United States could pressure the Shah to reform, and Nixon’s view of the Shah as a partner who could not and should not be pushed around. One wonders, given that Castiglioni rejects the personality-based explanation of the Kennedy-Johnson transition, if she thinks that Alvandi’s “Nixon-Kissinger-Pahlavi partnership” accounts for the developments of the 1970s, or if the more slow-burning, impersonal, and process-based framework carries more explanatory power for that decade, too.6

Castiglioni is more focused on process than people, and this is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because she convincingly demonstrates that one cannot understand the 1970s without understanding the process by which the Kennedy and Johnson administrations abandoned the push for liberal reform. That abandonment did not happen overnight. According to Castiglioni, it ran from Prime Minister Ali Amini’s resignation in Tehran in July 1962 to Richard Nixon’s inauguration in Washington in January 1969. Others point to different dates, but Castiglioni’s process-based approach is insightful. She finds that those who pushed for reform in Iran, especially White House aide Robert Komer, experienced the same problems under both administrations. “Just as in 1962,” Castiglioni writes, “in 1964 Komer could not do much to counter the alliance between the embassy in Tehran and the high-ranking officials of the State and Defence Departments” (501). With Iran low on Johnson’s radar and the Iran analysts on the National Security Council ignored, the Shah was able guide the bureaucratic inertia that lingered in Washington from the 1950s to his benefit as the measured policies of the 1960s gave way to the gluttony of the 1970s. However, if

3 Bill, The Eagle and the Lion, 170.


the Shah was steering the ship, one gets little of his perspective here. In fact, there are next to no principals in the article. While one gets an impressive range of views from country desk officers to embassy officials, the differences of opinion at various levels of the embassy and in the different branches of government are rarely analyzed.

Historiographically, the article under review is in conversation with some recently-published monographs on U.S.-Iran relations during the 1960s. While many scholars set out to explain the coming of the Iranian Revolution, Castiglioni’s main goal is, it seems, to explain what Stephen McGlinchey termed “the road to Tehran.” In fact, both McGlinchey and Castiglioni refocus the story of “blank check” on the “broader policy evolution,” each explaining it in their own way. Castiglioni also covers similar ground, as does Ben Offiler in his recent monograph on U.S.-Iran relations from Kennedy to Nixon. Despite a comparable periodization, however, there are important distinctions between these works. Whereas Offiler studies the relationship between geopolitics and modernization and includes some sections on non-state actors, Castiglioni is more interested in bureaucratic processes from the perspective of a diplomatic historian who places states at the center of the narrative. Castiglioni joins McGlinchey and Offiler, then, in urging scholars to consider the question of evolution or revolution in U.S.-Iran relations.

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