On 11 April 1962, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, landed in Washington, DC, stepping off his plane to be greeted by the president of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Accompanied by his wife, Empress Farah Pahlavi, it was only the Shah’s second official visit since a CIA-orchestrated *coup d’état* had restored him to the Peacock Throne in 1953. Forced by the inclement weather to welcome his royal guest inside an airport hangar, JFK joked, “This is one of our wonderful spring days, for which we are justly celebrated.”¹ Turning to the business at hand, the president told the Shah, “On your shoulders hang heavy burdens and heavy responsibilities”; not least due to Iran’s strategic location, “surrounded…by vital and powerful people,” but also because of his desire “to make a better life for your people.”²

As the official visit ended, Kennedy and the Shah declared that it had “strengthened the bonds of friendship between them in their quest for common objectives of peace and well-being.”³ The joint statement released by both governments framed the issue of development and modernization as the focal point of the discussions. Both leaders agreed that Iran needed to focus “on the necessity of achieving a high level of internal economic development and social welfare in order to continue the internal stability necessary to resist external threats.”⁴ The message complied with the rhetoric used by JFK in his inaugural address, which warned, “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.”⁵ It emphasized the basic assumption that sat at the heart of the modernization theories that have become synonymous with the Kennedy administration, namely that economic development leads to domestic stability, thereby helping to inoculate against communist subversion.⁶

Yet, the visit was not quite as harmonious as the public pronouncements suggest. Bad weather aside, from the outset there were signs that proceedings would not go as smoothly as planned. As the Shah’s plane landed, it was met by a protest by the Iranian Students Association; although small in number – and kept out of sight of JFK and the Shah – their support for the ousted prime minister, Mohammad Mosadeg, signalled burgeoning discontent regarding the Shah’s regime and its relationship with the United States.⁷ In the years to come, these
anti-regime protestors would remain a thorn in the side of US–Iranian relations.

Moreover, the topics discussed by Kennedy and the Shah during the actual meetings themselves were not limited to questions of modernization and development. Indeed, in the run-up to the Shah’s arrival, Kenneth Hansen, the assistant director of the Bureau of Budget, complained that the administration’s preparations were neglecting issues of development and focusing instead on Iran’s military needs. It was, according to Hansen, the question of reform and development that the US should concern itself with as outlined by the Iran Task Force set up by Kennedy in response to the country’s post-election crisis the previous year.

Seeking to differentiate itself from its predecessor, the Kennedy administration placed a high premium on the expanded role that foreign aid and economic development had to play in bolstering friendly nations against the threat of Soviet encroachment. In his final meeting with the Shah, the president stressed that Washington was “pinning great hopes” on Iran’s modernization. Kennedy declared that “nothing contributed so much to the Shah’s prestige as Iran’s economic programme,” which the United States was “very interested in cooperating with...as far as our resources would permit.” The Shah concurred, noting that “he had been working for twenty years at the task of building a strong anti-Communist society through social reform and economic development.” However, the Shah’s vision of modernity differed significantly from Washington’s.

While he accepted the importance of social and economic development, he stated unequivocally that “to succeed on the economic side Iran needs time and security.” Modernization, according to the Shah, would be achieved through Iran’s military. Rather than economic development, it was “the existence of revamped armed forces which will give Iran the prestige it has needed.” Warming to his theme, the Shah enthused that “with such an army Iran can resist Communist pressures and build the country into a showcase.” This fundamental difference in emphasis was to become the defining feature of US–Iranian relations throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite there being some agreement between Washington and Tehran on the desirability of pursuing economic development, the Shah prioritized military modernization to achieve Iran’s – and the Pahlavi dynasty’s – security above all else. Recognizing Iran’s strategic value, the United States made maintaining close ties with the Shah its primary objective.

Moreover, as the years passed, the Shah demonstrated a skill for persuasively presenting his own vision of modernity. Throughout the