



FDS

Frontiers of Discourse Studies

FDS, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026, pp. 74-84.

Print ISSN: 3106-809X; Online ISSN: 3106-8103

Journal homepage: <https://www.fdsjournal.com>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64058/fds260106psaeu>



The Persistent Shadow of American Exceptionalism on U.S.-Iran Relations: A Review of *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*

He Dongqing

Abstract: This paper critically examines Ray Takeyh's *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (2021). Structured into nine chapters, the book traces the rise and fall of the Pahlavi dynasty using extensive primary archival materials and chronological analyses of key events in modern Iranian history, providing valuable resources for the study of U.S.-Iran relations. However, the work is deeply permeated by American exceptionalism. Takeyh implicitly justifies U.S. intervention in Iran, downplays America's hegemonic ambitions, applies a double standard in comparing U.S. and Soviet involvement, but disregards Iran's legitimate security concerns, all of which weaken the book's academic credibility. Nevertheless, the book remains practically valuable for understanding the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict, as it reveals striking historical parallels between Pahlavi-era relations and contemporary tensions, offering a historical lens to interpret the recurring dynamics of bilateral confrontation amid U.S. global decline.

Keywords: U.S.-Iran relations; Pahlavi Dynasty; American Exceptionalism

Author Biography: **He Dongqing**, doctoral student at School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology. Her research focuses on foreign literature and area studies. E-mail: bonnieacademic@163.com

题目：美国例外论对美伊关系的恒久影响——评《最后的沙阿：美国、伊朗与巴列维王朝的覆灭》

摘要：本文批判性地评议雷·塔基 2021 年出版的著作《末代沙阿：美国、伊朗与巴列维王朝的覆灭》。全书共九章，作者基于大量原始档案文献，按时间线梳理伊朗现代史中的重要事件，全面追溯巴列维王朝的兴衰历程，为美伊关系研究提供了颇具价值的参考。然而，该书深受美国例外论思想的渗透影响，作者以隐晦的方式为美国干涉伊朗的行为作辩护，对美国的霸权野心轻描淡写，在对比美苏对伊朗介入行为时采取双重态度，无视伊朗正当的国家安全关切，导致本书的学术可信度受影响。尽管如此，该书对于理解 2026 年美以伊冲突仍具有现实关照意义，本书揭示出美伊关系在巴列维时期与当代出现了惊人的历史相似性，为解读美国全球相对衰落背景下美伊对抗反复出现的内在逻辑提供了历史视角。

关键词：美伊关系；巴列维王朝；美国例外论

作者简介：何东清，博士研究生，华南理工大学外国语学院，研究方向：外国文学，国别和区域研究。电邮：bonnieacademic@163.com

1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2026, the unending U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict has once again drawn global attention to the Middle East. The crisis has opened a Pandora's box of unpredictable consequences, from soaring energy prices and disrupted supply chains to heightened regional instability. Violent confrontations among the three countries continue to escalate along an uncertain trajectory. At the heart of this tripartite conflict lies the fundamental and unresolved U.S.-Iranian estrangement, which predates and ultimately shapes the role of any third party, including Israel. The underlying reasons for the persistent bilateral friction are complex yet enduring, and they share striking parallels with those vividly unpacked in Ray Takeyh's 2021 work, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (Yale University Press, 2021). By comparing historical patterns with the current crisis, the structural confrontation between the global hegemony of the United States and the pursuit of national self-determination of Iran clearly stands out. While Israel's security dilemma adds a volatile new layer to the equation, the enduring U.S.-Iranian rift remains the fundamental driver. Rooted in competing visions of regional order and sovereignty, this rift transcends individual eras, with the core tensions that defined the Pahlavi era continue to fuel today's crisis.

Ray Takeyh holds a doctorate in modern history from Oxford University, speaks Persian and has a working knowledge of Arabic. He specializes in the Middle East and has written several books and publications on Iranian politics and history, including *The Receding Shadow of the Prophet: The Rise and Fall of Radical Political Islam* (2004), *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (2006), and *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (2009). Ray Takeyh is a member of Iran Policy Project at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) and the

Hasib J. Sabbagh senior fellow for Middle East studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and a former U.S. State Department Senior Advisor. He has published more than 250 articles and opinion pieces in many news outlets including *Foreign Affairs*, *the New York Times*, and *the Washington Post*. *The Last Shah* emerges not merely as his latest definitive historical account of U.S. intervention in Iran's Pahlavi dynasty, but as a prescient lens through which to interpret the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict.

Published in 2021, *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty* (hereinafter *The Last Shah*) presents a panoramic history of U.S.-Iran relations from the 1920s to the 1980s, focusing on the Pahlavi Dynasty led by the last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and the 1979 revolution that brought the present Islamist government to power. The book meticulously documents several historical events within the dual contexts of Iranian domestic strife and Cold War rivalries, tracing Iran's drastic transformation from America's close ally in the Middle East into one of its thorny opponents.

In his book, Ray Takeyh holds the view that the 1979 Iranian Revolution was not the overthrow of a U.S.-controlled puppet regime, but rather the consequence of decades of autocratic rule by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, which systematically eroded Iran's political institutions. By gradually hollowing out parliament, suppressing independent statesmen, and relying on sycophantic technocrats, the Shah deprived the state of its capacity for self-correction. When the economic recession of the mid-1970s shattered the transactional bargain of "political passivity in exchange for economic benefits" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 4), the entire hollowed-out system collapsed. While America played a significant role, the revolution was fundamentally a tragedy of Iran's own political making.

The Last Shah offers a rigorous and grounded reconstruction of the Pahlavi dynasty's rise and fall, illuminating the complex interplay among U.S. and Iranian forces. Takeyh challenges one-sided narratives by restoring agency to Iranian actors. His nuanced portrayal of Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam exemplifies the book's attention to overlooked figures and diplomatic maneuvering. Qavam's deft diplomacy resolved the Azerbaijan crisis without territorial or political surrender. Unlike works confined to broad geopolitical strokes, this study reveals the secret coordination between Washington and Tehran and exposes the Shah's hesitant inner turmoil beneath his pro American posture. Most significantly, the book provides a vital historical lens for understanding the cyclical nature of U.S. Iran tensions. The patterns that Takeyh documents echo with striking clarity in the 2026 crisis. These patterns include persistent American attempts to shape Iran's domestic politics through external pressure, military deterrence, and diplomatic coercion. By combining scholarly rigor with narrative accessibility, *The Last Shah* stands as an indispensable resource. It is essential for comprehending both twentieth century Iran and the enduring structural contradictions that continue to fuel the contemporary conflict.

The limitations of *The Last Shah* stem from a common root. Its over-correction of the U.S. role in the 1953 Coup, its neglect of grassroots and rural clerical forces in the 1979 revolution, and its reliance for elite diplomatic archives over Iran's deep socio-cultural fissures all point to one conclusion: although Ray Takeyh places Iran at the geographic center of his narrative, he never fully breaks free from the ideology of American exceptionalism. In his telling, Iran's tragedy is described as a catastrophe resulting from a failure

to follow American advice, implicitly treating the U.S. modernization model as a universal standard. These limitations, however, are not merely academic shortcomings. They are symptoms of American exceptionalism that continues to shape American policy toward Iran. It is precisely this unshaken ideological undertone that grants the book its piercing relevance in 2026. American exceptionalism did not exit the stage with the Pahlavi dynasty's collapse. Instead, it merely changed masks. With abundant and diverse historical records, Takeyh reconstructs how 20th-century U.S. policymakers justified their interventions in Iran as morally and strategically necessary, a discourse that mirrors Washington's 2026 rhetoric of framing of its military intervention as a "defensive" response to "Iranian threats". This book review seeks to illustrate that both eras reveal the same contradictions: a superpower that preaches democracy and self-determination yet supports authoritarianism when convenient; one that denounces foreign intervention yet reserves the right to unilaterally shape Iran's future; and one that claims to seek stability yet repeatedly destabilizes Iran through sanctions, military action, and regime interference.

2. Overview of the Book

Based on declassified primary archives, diverse scholarly literature, and firsthand narratives, *The Last Shah* offers cross-national perspectives on pivotal events in Iran's modern history, enriched with behind-the-scenes details. Structured into nine chapters, the book unfolds key events chronologically: the Anglo-Soviet occupation, the Azerbaijan crisis, the oil nationalization movement, the 1953 coup, the Shah's growing autocracy, the White Revolution, Iran's independent foreign policy, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The book presents these complicated events in detail through numerous quotes from diplomats and leaders of the relevant nations.

Chapter 1 opens with the 1941 Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, prompted by Reza Shah's pro-German leanings. His forced abdication brought the young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to the throne under Allied supervision. Though initially weak, the new shah harbored authoritarian ambitions. Occupied and used as a logistical hub by the Allies during World War II, Iran was subsequently drawn into the frontlines of the Cold War in the postwar era. Chapter 2 recounts the Azerbaijan Crisis, the first accidental crisis of the Cold War. The Soviet Union instigated separatism in Iranian Azerbaijan, backing proxy forces and postponing troop withdrawal to undermine Iranian sovereignty. Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam's deft diplomacy successfully persuaded Stalin to withdraw Soviet troops and preserved Iranian sovereignty. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the oil nationalization movement and the 1953 Coup. Mossadeq challenged British oil interests and won massive popular support. Britain fiercely opposed Iran with sanctions and plotted plans for regime change, while the Soviet Union secretly backed Iranian nationalist forces to expand its Middle Eastern influence and weaken Western power. Initially watchful, the United States eventually joined the plan, driven by its Cold War containment strategy. The weak and hesitant Shah finally agreed to cooperate in the coup. This convergence of rival interests culminated in Operation TPAJAX, led by Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA in

Tehran. Despite early stumbles, the operation toppled Mossadeq and restored the Shah as a firmly pro-American ally. Chapter 5 details the Shah's consolidation of power. He sidelined independent politicians, created SAVAK, and adopted "positive nationalism" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 127) while aligning with the Baghdad Pact and Israel. Chapter 6 covers the White Revolution. Land reform, women's suffrage, and industrialization antagonized the clergy and provoked Khomeini's fierce opposition, leading to his 1964 exile. Chapter 7 depicts the Shah's pursuit of regional hegemony through an "independent international policy" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 186). Oil wealth and Nixon-era arms sales made him the U.S.-backed "policeman" of the Persian Gulf. His extravagance, however, bred deep domestic discontent. Chapter 8 narrates the 1979 Islamic Revolution. A broad coalition rose against autocracy and inequality. After the military turned neutral, the Shah fled into exile. Chapter 9 concludes with Khomeini's swift construction of a theocratic regime. A new constitution enshrined Velayat-e Faqih. Former allies were purged. Clerical authoritarian rule was firmly established.

In *The Last Shah*, the author argues that the 1979 Islamic Revolution was not a sudden accident. It was the inevitable result of a political project spanning decades. Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi systematically dismantled all independent sources of authority in Iran. To understand the monarchy's sudden collapse, one must examine how the Shah hollowed out the state step by step. He was an ambitious but arrogant modernizer. He confused blind loyalty with support and mistook autocracy for stability. In the end, he built a regime so isolated that no one would die for it when crisis came.

The author presents a revisionist view of the 1953 Coup against Prime Minister Mossadeq. Contrary to popular belief, he argues that the coup did not fundamentally alter Iranian politics. In the years after the event, prime ministers still held real authority and Parliament continued to function, and the old elite of landowners and merchants still pushed back against the monarch's ambitions. In 1954, General Zahedi and Ali Amini negotiated a major oil agreement with little help from the Shah. Even in 1958, the Shah had to bargain and manipulate rather than simply command. The author also shifts primary responsibility away from the CIA toward Iran's own political class, asserting that the decisive phase of the coup was "very much an Iranian initiative" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 115). He states clearly that Mossadeq's aristocratic peers were the first to turn against him and took the decisive steps to end his tenure. American involvement is not denied, rather, it is downplayed to a secondary factor. Takeyh goes so far as to argue that Iranian elites "would have moved against the premier [Mossadeq] even if Kermit Roosevelt [leader of the CIA in Tehran] had never set foot in Iran" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 116).

Takeyh shifts his focus to the inner dynamics that led to the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty by delving into Iran's domestic politics and the Shah's governing strategies. By drawing on numerous government archives from multiple countries, Takeyh paints a clearer picture of the evolution of Iran's internal political structure. The book concludes that it was the Shah's autocracy that gradually eroded the foundation of the regime and ultimately provoked the Islamic Revolution. From this perspective, the United States did not seek to directly control Iran's internal affairs. Instead, America appears as a reluctant actor who was dragged

into a predicament largely of the Shah's own making. This cognitive stance naturally diminishes American responsibility. In the context of this book review, Takeyh's narrative is regarded as a vivid example of American Exceptionalism, which will be further explored in the "Limitations of the Book" section.

3. Strengths of the Book

The Last Shah stands as a rigorous contribution to the study of U.S.-Iran relations and modern Iranian history, distinguished by its authoritative academic foundation and meticulous use of primary sources. Drawing on multilingual and multinational archival materials, the book reconstructs the rise and fall of the Pahlavi dynasty with considerable historical nuance. Takeyh illuminates the complex interplay of domestic politics, foreign intervention, and societal tensions that shaped Iran under Pahlavi rule, making the work an indispensable resource for both academic researchers and readers seeking a comprehensive understanding of 20th-century Iran.

The Last Shah challenges one-sided narratives by showing the complex interactions among U.S. policy, the shah's rule, and Iran's social and religious tensions. A compelling example is Takeyh's portrayal of Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam, who stepped forward to resolve the Azerbaijan crisis. The book explains in detail that the multi-layered tactics Qavam employed. He traveled to the Soviet Union to negotiate with conciliatory gestures by "portraying himself as a friend of the Soviets" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 39), and intentionally bringing the Tudeh Party into the government. Qavam promised oil negotiations as a bargaining chip and implied that additional benefits would be unavailable if the situation continued to deteriorate. By using oil as bait, parliament as a shield, the United States as a backer, and a pro-Soviet stance as a strategy, he achieved the impossible: a diplomatic breakthrough that required no national betrayal, no territorial concessions, and no surrender. Instead, he delayed Soviet invasion, stabilized the nation, and secured international support, all while protecting Iran's sovereign integrity and oil interests, with ambitions that the U.S. and Britain had ignored, as they had no direct stake in them. This holistic analysis challenges one-dimensional narratives and deepens reader's understanding of Iran's precarious position in the early Cold War, while also elevating Qavam from a marginalized figure to a pragmatic statesman. Unlike similar works that focus solely on broad geopolitical strokes, *The Last Shah* offers unique insights by revealing overlooked details of Qavam's diplomatic maneuvering and the Shah's hesitant inner stress, beyond his pro-American stance. Furthermore, the book draws on rarely cited archival evidence of secret U.S.-Shah coordination, offering a more nuanced inner dynamics of diplomatic exchanges.

What elevates *The Last Shah*'s academic value even further is that its provision of a valuable historical lens for understanding the long-term structural contradictions in U.S.-Iran relations and their continuing

relevance to modern tensions. Takeyh's detailed account of U.S.-Iran relations under the Pahlavi dynasty echoes core dynamics of the 2026 crisis: the United States' persistent attempt to shape Iran's domestic politics through external pressure, the use of military deterrence and diplomatic coercion to advance its regional interests, and the cycle of mutual distrust rooted in a history of foreign intervention. Just as the U.S. sought to curb the Shah's autocracy in the 1960s while retaining influence over Iran's governance, the year 2026 has seen the U.S. intervene in Iran's domestic affairs, deploy aircraft carrier strike groups to the Middle East, and push for regime change, mirroring the same pattern of overreach that defined its Cold War policy toward Iran.

Another striking similarity lies in the interplay between domestic unrest and foreign intervention. The book highlights Iran's historical resistance to U.S. hegemony and its refusal to compromise on national sovereignty and this theme remains central to the 2026 conflict, as Iran has pushed back against U.S. demands, engaged in diplomatic outreach to counter American pressure, and vowed to defend its territorial integrity and political system against external interference. These parallels underscore the book's enduring relevance: it is not merely a historical account, but a lens through which to understand the cyclical nature of U.S.-Iran tensions and the long-term consequences of foreign intervention in Iranian affairs.

In summary, *The Last Shah* is a masterful work that combines academic rigor with narrative accessibility. It contributes to the academia by humanizing historical figures, contextualize political decisions, and reveal the intricate web of domestic and foreign factors that led to the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty. Most importantly, its exploration of U.S.-Iran relations under the Pahlavi dynasty uncovers striking parallels with the 2026 conflict including U.S. military deterrence and intervention in domestic unrest as well as the cycle of mutual distrust and Iran's resistance to hegemony. This resonance makes it an essential tool for understanding contemporary tensions. This historical dimension elevates its academic value, positioning it as required reading for anyone interested in U.S.-Iran relations, Middle Eastern politics, or the dynamics of autocracy, revolution, and foreign intervention.

4. Limitations of the Book

Existing academic reviews of *The Last Shah* converge in their praise of its revisionist approach. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Michael Doran (2021) commends the book for placing Iranian actors at center stage and offering an "original interpretation". The book's revisionist claim that the 1953 coup "was more an Iranian plot than an American one" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 133) has been commended by reviewers such as Michael Doran (2021). Nikolas Gvosdev (2022) further emphasizes that Takeyh "returns full agency to the Iranians," revealing a Shah who was both pressured by Washington and adept at leveraging it for his own ends. Gvosdev (2022) also notes Takeyh's portrayal of Americans and Iranians as equally active players

seeking to use one another. Together, these two reviews affirm the book as a landmark revisionist work centered on Iran and a vital text for understanding U.S.-Iran relations and the roots of the 1979 revolution.

The consensus in these reviews is clear: *The Last Shah* restores Iranian agency, liberating the country from the role of mere historical object. Yet this emphasis on “agency” raises a further question. Does it inadvertently obscure a more fundamental issue? In focusing on Tehran’s internal power struggles, the book risks sidelining the inherent illegitimacy of the 1953 Coup. While *The Last Shah* argues Iran elites played a more important role than Britain and the United States, the undeniable fact remains that Iran’s democratically elected government was subverted by foreign intervention. Whatever Mossadeq’s political flaws or constitutional disputes, such internal matters do not alter the essential character of the external act that an outside power funded, manipulated, and toppled a sovereign government. Internal divisions among the targeted party do not excuse or change the nature of that intervention. However, the book glosses over this foundational problem, which is a tendency rooted in the narrative shelter of American exceptionalism.

American Exceptionalism, as a core narrative of U.S. political culture, has exerted profound and enduring influence on the nation’s foreign policy. Rooted in the 17th-century Puritan vision of “a City upon a Hill” (McDougall, 1997), this concept has “determined the American style in foreign relations generally” (Lipset, 1996). Lipset’s (1996) seminal work *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* systematically elucidates the dual nature of this concept: it functions both as a source of American democratic vitality and as a catalyst for excessive interventionism abroad. Madsen (1998) examines how exceptionalism has constructed American political and cultural identity while providing moral legitimacy for foreign policy. The prevailing framing of American exceptionalism is, at its root, an artifact of racialized subject-positioning, operating as a mechanism to systematically whitewash the realities of U.S. foreign policy (Maass, 2024). Takeyh’s narrative, despite attempting to present diverse perspectives, is fundamentally underpinned by this ideology, subtly aligning with American interests and justifying U.S. intervention in Iran, which distorts historical discourse and undermines the book’s academic credibility.

4.1 A strong sense of moral superiority

American exceptionalism, as Wang (2006) points out, endows the U.S. with a strong sense of moral superiority in international affairs, framing its foreign actions as altruistic and noble rather than self-serving. This bias is self-evident In Takeyh’s claim that, “In less than a decade, the United States twice upheld Iran’s independence at the risk of estranging its allies. America would make its share of mistakes in Persia, but its championing of Iran’s self-determination should never be forgotten” (Takeyh, 2021, p. 53). This statement directly echoes the American exceptionalism that Wang (2006) criticizes, reflecting the underlying belief that the U.S. always acts out of benevolence, not geopolitical ambition. By framing U.S. intervention as a “champion of self-determination,” Takeyh downplays the severe and long-term harms of U.S. meddling in

Iran's domestic affairs, merely glossing over dissenting voices and their impacts, as if U.S. mistakes are trivial compared to its "noble goals."

4.2 Noble goals justify any means

Wang (2006) emphasizes that American exceptionalism fosters a double standard in U.S. foreign policy: the U.S. judges itself with tolerance while imposing harsh standards on other nations, and it believes "noble goals justify any means." This double standard is most evident in Takeyh's description of the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mossadeq's government. He minimizes U.S. responsibility, claiming the coup was "very much an Iranian initiative" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 115) led by domestic anti-Mossadeq forces. In doing so, he underplays the crucial role that the United States actually played. That role included stressing the coup's urgency, supporting Fazlollah Zahedi as leader, providing massive cash bribes, coordinating the Shah's dismissal order, and inciting public unrest. He also downplays Britain's role in plotting the coup and strangling Iran's economy, obscuring the collaborative hegemonic intervention of the U.S. and Britain. This aligns with Wang's critique that exceptionalism allows the U.S. to "escape accountability for its interventionist acts" by framing them as necessary for "global order."

4.3 Double-standard behavior

Lipset (1996) points out that "to endorse a war, American must define their role in a conflict as being on God's side for morality against evil, not to defend material interests." Takeyh's exceptionalism bias is further reflected in his contrasting portrayal of U.S. and Soviet intervention in Iran. As Wang (2006) notes, exceptionalism leads the U.S. to depict its own intervention as "upholding justice" while denouncing other nations' actions as "hegemonic". Takeyh criticizes the Soviet Union's support for the Tudeh Party as "embracing Soviet priorities at the expense of Iran's sovereignty," yet turns a blind eye to the pervasive American control over Iran's regime, applying a double standard in terms of interference in Iran's internal affairs. During the oil nationalization crisis, he adopts the condescending attitude of the U.S. and Britain, referring to Mohammad Mossadeq as "a stubborn man who loved defying the great powers" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 67). This echoes Wang's argument that exceptionalism enables the U.S. to package its hegemonic acts as upholding "rules and order," essentially justifying the division of weaker nations' resources by powerful ones and denying their right to self-determination.

4.4 The U.S. modernization model as a universal standard

Madsen (1998) points out that "the conception of an exceptional historical mission is extended encompass foreign policy and a role in global politics as well." This is evident in Takeyh's discussion of U.S. policy toward Iran, where he notes that U.S. policymakers viewed Iran as "a laboratory for social change" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 24), launching reform missions to transform it into a "model of American benevolence in the developing world" (Takeyh, 2021, p. 5). Takeyh does not critique this arrogant imposition of American-style reforms on a nation with its own ancient traditions and unique needs, but rather implicitly endorses it,

reflecting the exceptionalism mindset that “America is destined to exemplify and disseminate the democratic capitalism” (Madsen, 1998).

4.5 Western-centrism ideology

Additionally, Takeyh’s attitude towards Iran’s nuclear program under the Shah reveals his Western-centrism, a product of exceptionalism. He clearly mocks the Shah’s pursuit of nuclear technology as “prestige-driven” to join the “exclusive nuclear club” (Takeyh, 2021, p. 190), dismissing it as irrational. This ignores the Shah’s and the country’s legitimate motivations: long-term energy security, regional deterrence against the great powers, and national sovereignty safeguard. As Wang (2006) argues, exceptionalism leads the U.S. to impose its own standards on other nations, denying non-Western countries the right to pursue their own security strategies and struggle to meet their safety demand. Takeyh’s refusal to acknowledge these legitimate reasons further exposes his bias.

In essence, *The Last Shah*, despite its detailed historical accounts, is deeply permeated by American exceptionalism. Takeyh’s adherence to this ideology leads him to frame U.S. intervention as benevolent, downplay its hegemonic essence, and impose Western-centric standards on Iran. As Wang (2006) concludes, the ideology’s inherent arrogance and hypocrisy have led to U.S. foreign policy failures and disasters for other nations, which is vividly manifested in the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran Conflict. Beyond the author’s own bias, U.S. attitudes and actions toward Iran have unwittingly embodied and practiced American exceptionalism. Notably, the book’s publication also reflects the U.S. academic community’s endorsement of the U.S. government’s stance toward Iran. By serving to legitimize U.S. exceptionalism rather than providing a balanced account, the book undermines its own academic value, failing to offer a profound and insightful understanding of U.S.-Iran relations and modern Iranian history.

5. Conclusion

Ray Takeyh’s *The Last Shah* is a valuable yet biased work in U.S.-Iran relations research. Its strengths lie in the author’s authoritative academic background as an Oxford PhD and former U.S. State Department senior advisor, paired with his Iranian-American identity which enables him to transcend simplistic, label-driven historical narratives. By utilizing first-hand U.S.-Iran archival materials and his proficiency in Persian, Takeyh reconstructs the rise and fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and highlights the enduring core contradictions between the two nations, offering a crucial lens for understanding the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. However, the book is deeply compromised by American exceptionalism, as it subtly justifies U.S. intervention and downplays its hegemonic character. Notably, the book comments that during the Azerbaijan crisis, the Soviet Union attempted to split Iran by cultivating local agents but ultimately failed: “the Soviets made the mistake of looking at Iran as a collection of ethnic groups that they could exploit to advance their ambitions. They failed to see how successive Iranian dynasties had knitted together a cohesive

nation” (Takeyh, 2021, p. 33) . This comment carries striking prescience for the 2026 conflict. Against the backdrop of U.S. global decline, as it struggles to maintain its once-unrivaled influence in the Middle East and curb the growing influence of Iran and other regional powers, the U.S. now actively provokes confrontations and interferes in Iran’s internal affairs through military means, repeating the Soviet Union’s error of underestimating Iran’s national cohesion and disregarding its sovereignty, which is bound to lead to the similar failure.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

ORCID

He Dongqing ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-6685-8317>

References

- Doran, M. (2021). The Last Shah review: A purely domestic conspiracy. The Wall Street Journal. https://thenewstalkers.com/buzz-of-the-orient/group_discuss/11975/
- 范鸿达. (2012). 伊朗与美国. 新华出版社.
- [Fan, H. D. (2012). *Iran and the United States*. Xinhua Publishing House.]
- Gvosdev, N. (2022). Reconsidering the Last Shah [Review of the book *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty*, by R. Takeyh]. *Orbis*, 66(1), 134–137. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2021.11.001>
- Lipset, S. M. (1996). *American exceptionalism: A double-edged sword*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- McDougall, W. A. (1997). *The promised land, crusader state: The American encounter with the world since 1776*. Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Madsen, D. L. (1998). *American exceptionalism*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Takeyh, R. (2021). *The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*. Yale University Press.
- 王立新. (2006). 美国例外论与美国外交政策. 南开学报, (01), 10-17+65.
- [Wang, L. X. (2006). American exceptionalism and U.S. foreign policy. *Nankai Journal*, (01), 10-17+65.]
- 王明芳. (2015). 冷战后美国的伊朗政策研究. 社会科学文献出版社.
- [Wang, M. F. (2015). *A Study of U.S. Iran Policy After the Cold War*. Social Sciences Academic Press (China).]
- 杨兴礼、冀开运、陈俊华. (2006). 伊朗与美国关系研究. 时事出版社.
- [Yang, X. L., Ji, K. Y., & Chen, J. H. (2006). *A Study of Iran-U.S. Relations*. Current Affairs Press.]