Douglas Little has turned his attention to the relationship between the United States and the Kurds, providing a damning indictment of U.S. policy towards this long-suffering group of 20-30 million people who live along the borders of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Marshalling an impressive array of documentary evidence, he argues that the United States repeatedly mobilized the fearsome Kurdish guerillas (Peshmerga or ‘those who face death’) in order to contain a succession of pro-Soviet regimes in Iraq, only to abandon the Kurds when the prospect of their autonomy materialized. Little’s arguments are not new; the same story has been recounted in a number of journalistic accounts written in the late 1990s. However, his article marks the beginning of a scholarly historiography on the United States and the Kurds, based on a small but growing body of declassified American documents.

Little’s grand narrative of the relationship between the United States and the Kurds spans every administration from Truman to Clinton and accuses almost all of them of having either turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Kurds at the hands of regional allies, or of having cynically used and then betrayed the Kurds in the pursuit of American strategies of containment. The article focuses on three episodes in particular: the indirect support of the United States for the Iraqi Kurds by the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, in order to contain the supposedly pro-Soviet regime of Abdul Karim Qasim and his successors; the direct support given by the Nixon and Ford administrations to the same Kurds in order to contain the Soviet-backed Ba’th regime that returned to power in Iraq in 1968; and finally the various failed attempts by the Bush (Senior) and Clinton

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administrations to use the Kurds to unseat Saddam Hussein following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. As Little writes, “In each case, the U.S. government exploited long-standing anti-Arab resentments among the Kurds, secretly supplied U.S. guns or dollars or sometimes both, and helped ignite an insurrection in Kurdistan, only to pull the plug unceremoniously when events threatened to spiral out of control.”

The total volume of available documentary evidence on U.S. policy towards Kurds over the last sixty years is rather meager. Many a frustrated historian has been confronted with boxes full of pink withdrawal slips when conducting research on the Kurds at various presidential libraries or the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Maryland (NARA II). The veil of secrecy surrounding U.S. dealings with the Kurds is a function of the paramount role played by the CIA in this troubled relationship. However, the publication in 2006 of a FRUS volume of Documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969-1972 was a major breakthrough, and a trickle of other documents are now available at the Nixon and Ford presidential libraries, in the CIA's Records Search Tool (CREST) and the records of the State Department at NARA II, as well as the on-line FOIA readings rooms of the State Department and the CIA, all of which are put to good use by Little. The author has also consulted the records of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, particularly reports from the British Embassy in Baghdad, as well as the abridged translation of the diaries of Asadollah Alam, the close confidante of the late shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Constructing a narrative of Washington's dealings with the Kurds from these limited primary sources is no easy task. Much is open to interpretation and speculation. Little makes some bold claims as he tries to fit a story of U.S. malfeasance towards the Kurds into a broader critique of American manipulation of racial tensions in the Third World during the Cold War. As Little writes, “In a classic Cold War story that would be repeated from the central highlands of Vietnam to the rugged savannas of Angola, U.S. policymakers exploited ancient ethnic and tribal fault lines inside Kurdistan to achieve short-term geopolitical advantage.” The devil, however, is in the details. The article spans both the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, but I will focus my comments on the 1960s and 1970s, where I am more familiar with the documentary sources.

There is no question that the Eisenhower administration and U.S. allies in the Middle East were deeply disturbed by Qasim’s bloody 1958 military coup in Iraq, which overthrew the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy and took Iraq out of the Baghdad Pact. There is,

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however, no substantial evidence to support Little’s claim that these concerns translated into covert U.S. support for the Kurdish rebellion against Baghdad, launched by Mullah Mustapha Barzani and his Kurdish Democratic Party in 1961. Little conflates Iranian and Israeli support for the Kurds, which began in the early 1960s in the context of the ‘periphery pact’ between these two non-Arab countries, with “indirect U.S. intervention” in Kurdistan. (73) In fact, the available evidence suggests that the United States was unhappy that Iran and Israel were destabilizing Iraq, thereby making Baghdad more dependent on Soviet assistance and creating opportunities for Communist subversion. The Kennedy administration warned Mohammad Reza Shah in February 1963 to “keep [his] hands off” Iraq and, in August of the same year, secretly provided arms for the Iraqi army. Washington enjoyed little influence over Iranian or Israeli decision-making with regard to the Kurds. Robert Strong, the U.S. ambassador in Baghdad, complained in October 1965 that, “Continued Iranian/Israeli intervention is a threat to the United States position in Iraq but, unfortunately, neither country is likely to be heedful of United States interests in the matter.”5 All this suggests that Iranian and Israeli support for the Kurds in the 1960s can hardly be construed as indirect U.S. intervention in Kurdistan.

Under Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, the consistent U.S. policy was to stay out of Iraq’s civil war by rejecting repeated Kurdish appeals for American assistance. The CIA may well have been pursuing its own policy of covert intervention in Iraq, without the knowledge of the State Department. However, as Little acknowledges, no documentary evidence has yet emerged to support this argument. (68) What we do know is that the Nixon administration broke with this long-standing U.S. policy of non-intervention in the summer of 1972, authorizing a covert CIA operation to arm and fund the Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq. Little subscribes to Henry Kissinger’s own explanation for this shift in U.S. policy, by arguing that the decision to intervene was driven by a “Cold War logic” to contain the Soviet-backed Ba’th regime in Iraq, which had returned to power in 1968. (77-78) For Little, the timing of the U.S. intervention is closely tied to the signing in April 1972 of a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Iraq and the Soviet Union. The burgeoning ties between Baghdad and Moscow, including Soviet support for the nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company in June 1972, undoubtedly played an important role in Nixon and Kissinger’s decision to intervene. However, Little does not pay enough attention to role of Mohammad Reza Shah in drawing the United States into the war in Kurdistan.

The shah’s decision to put his weight behind the Kurds’ pleas for American assistance played a crucial role in Nixon’s decision to intervene in Kurdistan in 1972. It was vital for the shah to keep the Kurds fighting, so as to maintain Iran’s leverage over Iraq in their

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5 Airgram A-424 from the Embassy in Iraq to the Department of State, 30 October 1965, FRUS 1964-68, XXI, 177.
border dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway and their ongoing struggle for regional supremacy in the Persian Gulf. Nixon took the decision to intervene after a direct appeal from the shah during their meetings in Tehran in May 1972.\(^6\) While the repeated requests for help from the stateless Kurds had been dutifully recorded and politely rejected by junior State Department officials, the intervention by the shah, a personal friend of Richard Nixon and a partner of the United States under the Nixon Doctrine, could not be so easily dismissed. It is entirely conceivable that had the shah not intervened, the United States would have continued to ignore the conflict in far-away Kurdistan, as Nixon and Kissinger focused on more immediate concerns such as the war in Vietnam, détente with the Soviet Union, the opening to China, and the president’s re-election campaign in November.

With such fragmentary primary sources to work with, there is room for widely differing interpretations of when, how, and why the U.S. chose to intervene in Kurdistan. Little tries to make sense of the U.S. relationship with the Kurds by placing it in the context of the global Cold War. However, our dependence on American sources should not distract us from the regional dimensions of the conflict. For much of the twentieth century, the Kurdish conflict was a proxy war between Iran and Iraq along their common border. To a large extent, these two local actors lured their superpower patrons into the Kurdish conflict by painting their regional rivalry in Cold War colours. The shah’s role in the Nixon-Kissinger intervention of 1972-1975, for which we have the most extensive documentary evidence, is a classic case of the ‘tail wagging the dog.’ A congressional investigation into this episode described Nixon and Kissinger as the shah’s “junior American partners”.\(^7\) The limits of Washington’s influence were apparent when the shah unilaterally decided to end Iranian support for the Kurds in a deal with Saddam Hussein in March 1975, presenting the powerless Ford administration with a \textit{fait accompli}.

We know so little about the international history of the war in Kurdistan particularly because we have so few Iranian, Iraqi, Israeli, Kurdish, or Soviet sources on the conflict. However, the available American and British documents on Kurdistan have opened a small window of opportunity for historians. The trickle of declassified American documents continues to grow, and a forthcoming \textit{FRUS} volume on \textit{Iran; Iraq, 1973–1976} promises further revelations. By advancing a scholarly historiography on the United States and the Kurds, based on these primary sources, Douglas Little has shown us that it is better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

\(^6\) Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, 30 May 1972, 5:35 p.m. to 6:35 p.m., \textit{FRUS 1969-1976}, E-4, 200; Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, 31 May 1972, 10:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m., \textit{FRUS 1969-1976}, E-4, 201.