“high regard for the clergy and the role of the bishops” (220). Although he cites it, Scribner fails to appreciate the teaching of the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Laity*. There is no tension between recognition of the irreplaceable roles of priests and bishops in the Church and promotion of active involvement of laity—as Church—in the world. Depending on the circumstances, strong statements and action concerning politics on the part of priests and bishops are called for. At other times and on other issues, political matters are best left to the laity. The neoconservatives were not, then, arguing for a quiescent episcopacy with respect to public life, but instead for better judgment about how and when to go about engaging the public sphere. Catholic social teaching offers criteria for adjudicating this question.

Scribner’s failure to understand the difference between the neoconservatives and their opponents in these terms makes for a dissatisfying conclusion to the book, but it remains an admirable effort to articulate and analyze this influential strand in American Catholic social thought.

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In the book *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*, Geoffrey Shaw, a professor of history and currently the president of the Alexandrian Defense Group, a think tank on counterinsurgency warfare, weaves a tale of personalities, bureaucratic infighting, geography, warfare, and ultimately the betrayal and death of a political leader at the behest of the United States government. From the beginning of the book, Shaw makes it clear to the reader what his perspective is with regard to the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, and his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu on November 2, 1963. To him it was the outright “murder” of a good, virtuous Catholic man who served his country in many different capacities: district chief, provincial governor, prime minister, founder of a political party, and finally president of South Vietnam. Diem was an ardent anti-communist, who wanted to protect his country from the onslaught of Communism coming from North Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh, and backed by the Chinese and Soviet governments. To help him achieve this,
he and the United States developed a close relationship during this tense period in the Cold War.

The majority of the book covers the early 1960s, while South Vietnam was in a desperate struggle against the insurgent Communist forces of the Viet Cong. The United States was initially supportive of the Diem government, even helping Diem to become president of the newly created government of South Vietnam in 1954, after the breakup of Indochina. According to Shaw, relations began to go awry with the arrival of Averell Harriman at the Department of State in December 1960, and the creation of what was called “the Harriman group,” a coterie of powerful like-minded individuals whose goal was to have Diem and his brother Nhu removed from power. Diem was not without friends, however, and the list is extensive: U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Frederick Nolting, CIA Station Chief William Colby, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, among others. They supported the Diem government in its struggle against the Communists, and saw him as the best man to get the job done. Given Diem’s background, he possessed the “Confucian Mandate of Heaven” (hence the title of the book), bestowing a political legitimacy upon him that few others shared. This type of legitimacy was essential in holding the country together.

There was one actor, though, that weakened the positions of these seemingly strong allies of Diem, and even Diem’s Mandate of Heaven: the American press corps, which Shaw references time and again throughout the book in exhibiting their utter contempt for Diem and his brother Nhu, as well as Nhu’s wife, Madame Nhu. Their perfidy and outright hostility painted a picture of the Diem government as corrupt, authoritarian, abusive, and marked by nepotism. In league with the Harriman group, as well as U.S. Senator Mike Mansfield, the Senate majority leader and powerful member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, they created an irresistible force that would ultimately bring down the Diem government.

At the end of the day, however, Shaw points to one person with whom the ultimate responsibility lies. Surprisingly it is not Diem’s enemies Ho Chi Minh or North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap, but President John F. Kennedy, who gave the final order to have Diem and Nhu removed from power. He alone could have stopped this course of action and continued to support the Diem government. However, as the 1964 election approached, under the influence of the Harriman group and pressure from the American press, who were persuading the American people against the Diem government, Kennedy believed he had no other choice but to remove the current government in South Vietnam in order to gain victory over the Communists. Shaw concludes that it was a tragic mistake lead-
Drawing from an impressive number of primary and secondary sources supplemented by copious footnotes, Shaw ingeniously unravels the plot to take down the Diem regime. But there is one aching question that is never fully addressed in the book: Who would replace Diem and his brother Nhu? Shaw does not explain how the parties pushing for Diem’s removal would answer this question. It is only at the end of the book that Shaw reveals that it was a select number of Vietnamese generals who, backed by the U.S. government, initiated the coup and subsequently murdered the Diem brothers. Given that soldiers, the *binh*, were held in the lowest position in traditional Vietnamese society, and that the Diem government was constantly harangued for its supposedly weak human-rights record and lack of liberality during its fight against the Viet Cong, it is surprising that the U.S. government would turn to the generals as a better alternative.

Devoting some time to the question of why the U.S. government selected these generals, in particular General Duong Van Minh, who was known for his “petty and vicious motivations,” would have helped the reader to further understand the actions of the U.S. government in this sad episode. It is also surprising how this decision was made by President Kennedy even when confronted with several positive reports on the improving conditions in Vietnam by the Department of Defense and even Congress, along with Diem’s strong supporters in the administration and in other foreign governments. It appears that there is more to the story in the face of the severe lack of unanimity to depose the Diem brothers.

Nevertheless, this book is a must-read for those who wish to understand the fundamental reasons why the United States lost the Vietnam War. According to Shaw, with the death of Ngo Dinh Diem, the war was lost before it was even begun.

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