

the current situation and of current technological issues. It is well worth reading.

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The Lost Mandate of Heaven: The American Betrayal of Ngo Dinh Diem, President of Vietnam

Geoffrey Shaw. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2015. 314 pp. Biblio. Index. \$24.95.

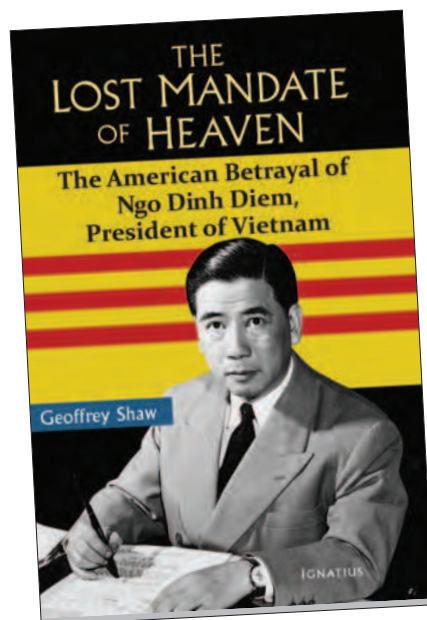
Reviewed by Captain Nathaniel L. Moir, U.S. Army Reserve

Hosni Mubarak, Augusto Pinochet, Manuel Noriega, Ngo Dinh Diem—these are only a few of the difficult allies the United States has supported to varying degrees in the pursuit of its foreign policy. While each relied on American funding, each challenged U.S. values and policies respecting their countries. Ngo Dinh Diem, President of the Republic of Vietnam from its founding in 1955 to his death through a U.S.-led coup d'état in 1963, remains perhaps the most contested and mercurial of the leaders to enter into an uneasy relationship with the United States in the 20th century. Perhaps issues with Diem were caused by challenges stemming from the broader Cold War. Maybe the challenges of Vietnamese revolutionary war and subversion were the problem. Diem's unyielding resistance to American influence on many issues, along with his interactions with equally intractable Americans, compromised the establishment of a viable state in South Vietnam. These were some of the factors that contributed to Diem's vexing place in the history of the Vietnam War.

It is unsurprising that historians periodically revisit Diem's role, particularly since analogous contemporary relationships—most recently with the former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, and the former prime minister of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki—echo these negative American diplomatic experiences. Several studies of Diem and the United States have been

published recently, including Jessica M. Chapman's *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, and Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*. The most recent and revisionist study is Geoffrey Shaw's *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*.

Among these, Shaw's book unquestionably stands out, but, regrettably, for the wrong reasons. Shaw questions assumptions about the personality and nationalism of Diem and, especially, the fact that he sought an independent Vietnam free from American meddling. In themselves, these are valid premises to reexamine. The paradox Diem faced, however, was the Republic of Vietnam's reliance on external aid, since its survival was impossible without



American support. Shaw concedes these points but provides an analysis of Diem's death that pins responsibility on the United States, which demanded too much of him. Diem's fall, as is well known, led to disaster. The vacuum created by his death and that of his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, leader of the Can Lao Party, led to a convulsive instability the United States and subsequent Vietnamese leaders failed to resolve. President Lyndon Johnson's decision to fill the political void led to an escalation of the war instead of a negotiated settlement. Such a settlement was supported by leaders ranging from Secretary General of the United Nations U Thant of Burma to

French President Charles de Gaulle and included American writer Walter Lippmann. The problem was that those who counted, specifically Johnson and his inner circle, did not support it.

The possibility of a settlement for Vietnam, however, was complicated by the neutralization of Laos in 1961. In a valuable chapter, "The Continuing Laotian Question," Shaw examines the challenges a neutralized Laos presented throughout Indochina. As a result of W. Averell Harriman's influence as President John F. Kennedy's ambassador-at-large, the negotiated settlement for Laos put the defense of South Vietnam and Diem's position at a serious disadvantage. The sanctuary Laos provided for North Vietnamese troops was critical. The poor relationship between Diem and Cambodian ruler Norodom Sihanouk also played a role. While the logistic corridors the Ho Chi Minh Trail provided along the Laotian border were important, 70 percent of external supplies for the Vietcong did not transit the infamous "Blood Road" in Laos, but rather through the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. Diem's intransigence with his Cambodian neighbors created significant problems. Shaw, however, does not adequately examine these issues.

As a result of these and other shortcomings, Shaw's work does not present a nuanced or scholastically supported counterweight to other recent scholarship on Diem. Instead, he adopts a revisionist position that attempts to retrench arguments in support of Diem from the late 1950s. On this note, his reading of both primary and secondary sources is puzzling.

For example, Shaw calls out journalist and scholar Bernard Fall, perhaps the most astute contemporary critic of Diem in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Shaw states that Fall "did not take seriously the threat the Communists posed to Diem's GVN, never mind how the president was supposed to deal with it." Untrue. Fall viewed the problem stemming from Diem's autocratic repressive measures and that "the South Vietnamese regime began to take on highly-resented police state features long before the guerrilla threat justified the adoption of some of them for the purpose of restoring internal security."

If a scholar attempts a historiographical intervention to counter established argu-

ments, that scholar is expected to provide evidence, perhaps gained through previously unavailable archival documents, which supports a convincing argument. Shaw, despite the heuristic validity of his project, provides neither. Jessica Chapman's project, by contrast, does account for the enigma Diem presented the United

States. Regardless, Ngo Dinh Diem con-founded policy-makers and historians before, so he remains worthy of further study. In this regard, Shaw's effort is productive because he challenges scholars and readers to prove him wrong. In addition, it is unwise to assume that difficult allied partners such as Diem, and worse

reincarnations of him elsewhere, are gone for good. Scrutiny of the past is always worthwhile. ❄️

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