Episode 645: JFK's Catastrophic Mistake in Vietnam

Guest: JFK's Catastrophic Mistake in Vietnam

WOODS: I just told people about your book, *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*, and the basic thesis of it. Really it's a stunning book, and in a way, the thesis of it is summed up in a line on page 18 that really struck me. You wrote, "In order to solve a problem that did not exist, the Kennedy administration created a problem that could not be solved." That's devastating. That's beautiful. When you come up with a line like that, you've got to be dancing a jig. That's perfect. Encapsulates what you're saying in just a beautiful way. But if I were to throw that out at you, then we would be diving too deeply into the book. I want to start off — I want to have you introduce Diem to the audience. What's his background, and how does it happen that there's a point in U.S. history in the 1950s in which most, arguably, of the American establishment is very much behind him?

SHAW: Okay, well, his background is this: he came from a well-established Mandarin family in the imperial city of Hue. They were ministers who served the emperor in Vietnam, and basically it was a Roman Catholic family that had been, I think they converted just before the father, who is Ngo Dinh Kha, but they witnessed persecutions of — it's ironic that when we think of Vietnam, the alleged Buddhist persecution, when in fact there had been many very real persecutions of the Roman Catholics who had been killed and everything taken and stolen from them.

Anyway, so he came from that background, and at a very young age he was well educated. His father insisted on good education for the whole family, and at a very young age of mid 20s, he was managing a number of villages, smaller villages which encompassed a bigger village in Vietnam, and he did so well of it that he came to the attention of not just the Vietnamese leaders, but also the colonial masters, the French, who, from that point on, started to offer him jobs within the Vietnamese indigenous or — how shall we say it? — yeah, indigenous government.

And he excelled at that and he was well respected by basically many of the farmers and local people, because he knew so much about agriculture, how to get the best rice crops, how to get the best fish ponds built, the things that were very important to the ordinary Vietnamese. So he was honored and revered at that level. So he excelled. We're talking mid 20s. And then he became basically the minister of a whole province under the Vietnamese/French government and continued to excel at that and be widely respected as both a fair, just, and incorrupt ruler, and also this bought him

enormous non-communist nationalist credentials. And this is very important, because eventually the communists took over what was the national front for all organizations that objected to French rule and just subsumed them unto themselves, and everything then became communist, but they tried to claim that, no, it was a popular national front, as they generally do.

Anyway, so he had garnered these credentials through hard work and diligence and capability, and especially what's important, what we call this Mandate of Heaven in the Confucian sense, is that it was a moral capability and a moral authority, which was very, very important to the Vietnamese. It was more important than, say, being really good at giving political speeches and glad-handing and smacking people on the back and big smiles and kissing babies. That didn't mean anything to them. What was important to them was the moral authority of the leader. He had to live his life by example.

Anyway, he also had aspired at one time or another to be a priest. He had studied very diligently within Roman Catholic schooling to acquire those credentials, and he also had a hankering to be a monk. So his first calling seemed to be toward the religious life, but he gained because of the Confucian ethic, he saw it as his moral obligation to help his country out in a time of need, and this became especially so in the immediate post-1945 era when basically all heck was breaking loose in all of these emerging countries and the communists were riding that wave and taking over many of the local objections to the remaining colonial rule.

So he goes on from there and actually becomes prime minister under the essentially puppet emperor, Bao Dai. But before all this happens, of course he has encounters with the communists. Ho Chi Minh himself had him captured and tried to win him over to being with their conglomerate of parties, which was really just the communist party. And he refused, and Ho Chi Minh was so enamored with the man's capabilities as a Vietnamese leader and just that morality, he wouldn't kill him. He let him go. Later various communists said that was a mistake; he should have killed him.

But he also had run into trouble with the French because of his strong nationalist standings. But they jailed him a couple of times. They stripped him of all the awards and medals he had won. And then they found out they couldn't get by without him, that the Vietnamese wouldn't respond to anybody but Diem, so they took him out of isolation, gave him his awards and medals back, and then of course he would just carry on being Diem, which was just a totally honest and frank, nationalist Vietnamese who didn't want much to do with the colonial power anymore — nor had he ever, I should add.

So we move on to the point where there are death threats now from various communists, and he moves off on a world tour. He actually has an audience with the pope, and he meets the Vietnamese in Paris, and then he's in the United States for quite a while, many months, and he takes up residence at the Maryknoll Seminary in upstate New York. This is where he met men like Mike Mansfield and — Senator Mike Mansfield, very powerful senator — Cardinal Francis Spellman, and young

Massachusetts senator, JFK, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. And they were all mightily impressed with him. One of the thing that impressed them the most was the fact that they'd go to meet him or take him out to go to a meeting, and he would be scrubbing the floors in the seminary, taking out the garbage, doing all the mundane things, and they would see this as, well, how can a big leader of a country be like this. But that was precisely what the Vietnamese honored in him so much, was his absolute humility that way.

So essentially many American historians have written that it was the Americans who sought him out for the very troubled Vietnam, especially in post-Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and the collapse of the French effort there. And I should say it was a political collapse, not a military collapse, because three-quarters of the French forces in Indochina were undefeated after Dien Bien Phu, but there was no will at home to continue. France was in an uproar over Vietnam and in an uproar over many things. So he was — anyway, getting back to him, he was in the States, and he sought out these gentlemen and was advised to do so by his brothers and by others to get American support, because he thought that that would be the best way to go forward for a non-communist nationalist Vietnam. And the Americans absolutely loved what they saw in the man. They saw an incorruptible, humble man.

So 1955, he does become president, and there's some trouble with some sects, and I should say there were people like the Binh Xuyen, which were a river pirate organization, but the sects had very powerful armies that belonged to them. So he had quite a challenge from the beginning, and the French were of course supporting the sects, and even at that time, the American advice was, well, why don't you go along with them. But he said, how can I be the leader of Vietnam and go along with a sect that essentially has bought the police concession in Saigon, and at the time is running the biggest opium dens and prostitution network in all of Southeast Asia. And they had no answer to that. So he did eventually undermine and destroy those, and it was basically a clash of arms. The French stood back, and even the Americans as early as '55. They stood back from that clash, too, not sure if they should support him through that.

So we go through the '50s, and he's basically rebuilding a ruined country. And very important: in the rebuilding, because of his Confucian understanding of history, and the place and the power of it in the Vietnamese mind, he recognized that Buddhism itself was in total collapse and disarray and utterly dilapidated of any physical infrastructure. So basically he became the single most important person in rebuilding historical Buddhism in Vietnam in the post-'45 era, and really that should be the pre-'45 era, too, because it had been collapsed for some time under the French colonialism, because — not that he was a Buddhist. He was a devout Roman Catholic — by the way, a devout Roman Catholic who was up for Mass every morning at 6:30. It was that he saw it as part of Vietnamese culture and history, and he also saw it at least as a partial answer for those who were looking for new direction with the removal of colonial authority, who he didn't want wandering into the lands of the communist — ideology, that is.

So we get through the '50s, and by the end of the '50s, Vietnam has been so miraculously recovered under Ngo Dinh Diem, along with a lot of American aid and help, which was very good. And they actually were building schools, roads, everything, even rudimentary healthcare in the rural districts, to the point where the communist leadership in the North had a meeting in '59 and said, if it goes on like this, the whole thing is going to collapse. We'll have no chance of winning back South Vietnam. Incidentally, there had been in the Geneva Accords, the part that were signed with the French in post-Dien Bien Phu in 1955, that by 1956 the country, which had basically been artificially dissected as North and South Vietnam, would have elections.

WOODS: Yeah, I wanted to ask you about this, because this is another of the points of the conventional wisdom, isn't it, that in 1956, the reunification election was supposed to be held; it was not held; the South did not consent to it. And in the argument is that's because they knew that the wildly popular communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, would have been overwhelmingly successful, and the U.S. backed Diem in refusing to consent to the elections. What do you think of that explanation?

SHAW: Well, it is the standard explanation, but it just does not — the kindest thing I can say is it just doesn't mesh with reality and the facts. Here are the facts: By 1956, like all communist governments just previous to that, Ho Chi Minh and his cronies up in the North, thought, well, we have to have a land reform. And they started land reform.

And under communism, land reform is really a euphemism for bashing the peasants: any landowning farmer, be he large or small, declaring them all wicked landlords, and essentially stripping, robbing them of their property, and then reforming state collectives. It always go violent and terribly wrong, where you have a fellow farmer who's vindictive or has an axe to grind against another farmer declaring to the authority, he's a landlord and he's robbing the peasants. And so he and his family get murdered, and the land goes sometimes to the other fellow, who then becomes in charge of the collective. So a lot of this was going on. We know that at least 10,000 Vietnamese had been slaughtered. They had to call in several regiments to enact their land reform in various regions in North Vietnam, and in so doing, of course a lot of peasants were murdered.

So then what was determined as also part of the 1956 accords was — or what was to happen in 1956 before the vote was, okay, all people in the South who want to go North can go North, and all people in the North can go South. Well, no one went North, but pretty well over a million went South. Yes, many of them were Roman Catholics, but there were many others. They fled the North —

WOODS: See, I've heard the Left explain this away, that this was right-wing propaganda that scared people into leaving.

SHAW: (laughing) No, what scared them into leaving was all the murder and mayhem going on with the land reform, who eventually —

WOODS: That would be my view.

SHAW: Yeah. Even the communists eventually said, oh, we made mistakes. Again, that's a euphemism when communists say they made a mistake, that too many people got murdered and it made too big a noise.

But anyways, so these folks, they flee South. Now, many of them left with the shirts on their back, and they have nothing. And here we have President Diem in his palace in Saigon. Incidentally, he does not live an ostentatious life, by people who knew him and I who have talked to. He lived in his office. He slept on a cot. Ate fish and rice. He would have nothing to do with the rich man's life, which was just some part of his nature. And when people would come to him and say we've got all these people looking for help and they've got nothing, he would empty his own pockets, his own bank account. He gave himself away to these people, and it stunned all those who knew him, of course causing greater reverence. I mean, how many politicians do you know who would give up their salary to other people? But he did it.

So these people came down South, and yeah, round about 8 to 900,000 of them were Roman Catholics. And people go, oh, well, there you have the sort of building of a Roman Catholic state oligarchy. But you have to remember, the strength of the Roman Catholics was first they had this faith that was absolutely powerful against communism. It gave them a rock-hard anchor, fortress against it. Also, they were by far and away the best educated. But regardless of that, Diem was still mindful to include Buddhists wherever he could, and as General Nguyen Khanh told me, he said, well, look, I'm a Buddhist, and I was one of his favorite generals. His cabinet was three-quarters Buddhist. So there were these objections that somehow he was building a Roman Catholic state to the exclusion of all else. They're just not founded in reality.

Neither were the 1956 accords. The communists went quiet on it, and as Edward Geary Lansdale said, he said — and he predicted this. He said the communists will let it drop. You watch. They won't make a sound about, because they know that if they had elections they would lose mightily right now because of the bloody mayhem that had gone on in the land reform. And it was pretty well that straightforward. So the '56 elections were actually dropped by both sides, with a little bit of noise from the communist party blaming the South and the South not really responding because they knew the truth. Everybody who had fled the North knew the truth. Again to underscore for your listeners, no one fled to the communists, but pretty near and maybe over — we're not too sure — over a million people fled from them. So that should tell you just who was popular and who wasn't.

WOODS: Now, by the way, that's exactly the answer that Nixon gives in his book, *No More Vietnams*, that he wrote in the '80s, looking back on the experience. And I think people are not inclined to believe it because it's coming out of Nixon's mouth, but just because Nixon says something doesn't make it false. I mean, I think what you're saying is the correct answer to that question.

SHAW: Yeah, and it's very sad, and a little aside here about Nixon, because in foreign affairs he actually was — I hate to say it. He and Henry Kissinger had a stellar team together. They actually showed an adeptness at foreign policy and diplomacy that both the Chinese and the Russians, the Soviets, really respected and have since, as we've seen, lost all respect for the State Department. But sorry, we're —

WOODS: Well, here's what I want you to tell me about now. Let's go to 1960, '61. I want you to describe the backdrop of murders and abductions by communist insurgents that's going on in South Vietnamese society. This is kind of important for setting the stage for what happens and what's going on there.

SHAW: Yeah, absolutely. Well, we were just at about that point when I diverted to the '56, but here we go. The issue that was going on was, as I said, the communists had their big meeting in the North. They said, look, the South is solidifying. It's going to be a non-communist nation. We have to do something now. And so they did. They basically reactivated their many, many cadres who stayed behind in South Vietnam. It was not — I know one of the popular stories on the Left is that the insurgency was one that was kicked off because of Diem's brutal rule, which is just a total lie, to be blunt. What had really happened was, of course, that the communists had a very thoroughgoing infrastructure of cadre of Viet Minh, who were to become Viet Cong in the South. And of course they already had supply lines through Laos, and we have the documents that show that even at that time they were starting to move massive amounts of materiel and men and ammunition down through Laos. This becomes important, as we shall see.

So they basically kicked off the insurgency, which they called — and again, you have to have a sense of smell and sense of hearing whenever the communists have something. They called it the "destruction of the oppression," which was their euphemism for a terror campaign in order to stop people from supporting the government. They would go into the local villages and they would find the chief or the school teacher or school teacher/local healthcare worker, and they would parade them as an enemy of the people in front of the village, and they would routinely — and I've got pictures of this that make your stomach turn. I've seen all the documents on it. They would slaughter the children in front of the parents, then slaughter the wife, and then eventually they'd slaughter the man in front of — they called the village together, in front of the whole village. And they did this usually by disemboweling and then beheading. It was very, very terrible and gruesome.

So what this did was terrorize the people into silence, and then of course when the soldiers from the South would come and say, well, what happened, they couldn't get anything out of them. And it became very frustrating for even some of the soldiers. Some of them acted in a way that frustrated soldiers do act, and some acts of brutality did happen, but by and large not many, because Diem wouldn't count them as it.

So it is around this time that, along with a British advisory team, because we're coming into 1960, '61, with this "destruction of the oppression," i.e., the terrorization of the

local Vietnamese in the villages by the communists, going on on full steam — I mean, within the space of two years, you have to understand they had murdered, in the most terrible fashion that we just couldn't imagine, over 20,000 officials in the local villages. That's the kind of infrastructure they had to knock out of the way to terrorize the people. So it was very, very substantial, and especially for a not well-to-do emerging country. That's something to always bear in mind, that there's not a lot of educated officials and schoolteachers around, so when you murder them off, you're really left floundering, and Vietnam to a certain extent was. But nevertheless, training and more education of new teachers went on apace, with, again, thanks to American help and aid.

So they had to come up with a counterinsurgency program, and this is when they brought in the British expert panel that had been so successful in Malaya against the communists there and include Sir Robert Thompson. And in discussions with Bill Colby, who was then the CIA station chief who I interviewed and knew quite well, they came up with the idea of the Strategic Hamlet Program, which actually in a short description pretty well emulated what had gone on in Malaya and the successful destruction of the insurgency in Kenya, where I actually grew up there, so I know a little bit about what happened to the Mau Mau.

So they started that with these strategic hamlets, which gave the people a say in their own security, and the hamlets had to elect their own head or chief, and so it gave a local democratic feel to it. And Ngo Dinh Nhu, Diem's brother, was fully engaged in this, along with the British advisory and along with of course the CIA. And it started to work, and it started to work magnificently, to the point that even the communists, by 1962 — and we have this in Will Burchett, he was an Australian socialist who traveled with the Viet Cong, they admitted that 1962 was a victory year for Diem. They had so battered the Viet Cong back and the communists, they couldn't penetrate the villages.

And so they started trying to target the strategic hamlets, but the strategic hamlets were working so well they couldn't destroy them, so they started using the American new media more and more to make sounds about how wicked the strategic hamlets were, that they were concentration camps and all this sort of thing. But even that wasn't working. Suddenly, lo and behold, what do we have in a country where there had been no Buddhist persecution? A Buddhist crisis, out of nowhere, from men who other Buddhists said weren't even Buddhist. And men like Thich Tri Quang, the leader of it, who was well associated with — I mean, his brother was in the communist party up in the North, and he was associated with the communists over in Cambodia. But that's just one side, and I won't get into that now. There's much to the Buddhist crisis that was really a red herring, that —

WOODS: Yeah, see, when you say red herring, that reminds me of the next thing I want to ask you, which is, obviously at some point the U.S. administration sours on Diem —

SHAW: Yeah.

WOODS: And one of the reasons we're given is the alleged Buddhist persecution, because this was bad public relations, it made the regime look bad, it was undermining the anti-communist effort, all that stuff. But I can't believe that's the full explanation.

SHAW: No, the real explanation —

WOODS: Yeah, tell me what it was.

SHAW: It has nothing to do with the Buddhists. It has to do with a failure in American diplomacy, and where this starts is with Averell Harriman, a very powerful, very influential New Dealer. I mean, he was well recognized as a man with enormous influence in and around D.C. In fact, he had even helped JFK in his election campaign, and therefore, even though he was becoming quite the elder statesman, they felt they had to pay him off with something after the election, and of course they gave him his own title of Roving Ambassador, and then eventually whatever title he wanted in the State Department, and he had several.

But what happened was that during the Second World War, he had been FDR's right-hand man with the Soviets, procuring agreements for how things would go during the war, which he was reasonably good at, and how Europe would look after the war, which he was abysmally bad at, even though they all hailed him as the great negotiator, because as we know, all the agreements for Eastern Europe, Stalin threw into the garbage bin.

So Harriman, here was his chance to go and really leave the whole diplomatic field with a big win. And how he saw it, looking at Southeast Asia along with JFK, who was scared stiff of what he saw there, especially with the fact that they knew Laos was being used by the communists, was, let's declare Laos neutral and get the Soviets — and Averell said, I can get the Soviets to make their clients, the North Vietnamese comply. And in a famous conversation, or infamous conversation, he had with Ambassador Frederick Nolting, who was JFK's ambassador to Vietnam, he said, I have a fingertip's feeling that I can get the Soviets to make the Vietnamese communists comply with keeping Laos and in June they'll stay out of there.

And Ambassador Nolting said to him, well, I don't have your experience with the Soviets, but my fingertips are telling me the exact opposite, and of course his fingertips were the correct ones. The Soviets were only too happy to be given this position of enormous prestige in the negotiations of Southeast Asia, so they said, yes, of course, we can get them to comply. Well, there was no compliance from the North, but Averell — and so really, the Pathet Lao, who were an NVA or North Vietnamese construction, you know, they were a communist force in Laos, just expanded, and so did the trail system and supply system to the South.

So what happened then was of course the Vietnamese, and even people from Thailand, everybody in the region was squawking, you cannot make Laos neutral. Harriman had to go out, he went out in 1961 with the new ambassador, Frederick Nolting out there,

and he started to — he had a meeting with Ngo Dinh Diem about Laotian neutrality, because Ngo Dinh Nhu had been adamant that you couldn't have Laos neutral. That would be surrendering South Vietnam to constant attack on its flank. He would be constantly on the strategic defensive, and it couldn't bode well for the future.

Harriman clashed with Diem immediately. Apparently from eyewitnesses, and Nolting was one of them, there was sort of a visceral dislike that was taken, one for the other before they even began talking. There just was a clash of a very worldly man, Averell Harriman, with a very unworldly man, Ngo Dinh Diem. That meeting didn't go well, at the end with Harriman basically outright threatening Diem that if he didn't comply the U.S. would pull away all support, and of course that would be the economic collapse of South Vietnam — not the military collapse, but certainly the economic, which would lead to the military collapse.

So Diem was silent on this, and basically Ambassador Nolting after that point had to try and get South Vietnamese compliance, even though he agreed with the South Vietnamese. And a quick note here: Nolting had been sent out by Kennedy to assure the South Vietnamese government of their absolute support by the U.S. government and that they would not interfere in South Vietnamese governmental practices and that they respected their autonomy as a national government. And Nolting was extremely good at that, even though when he had first gone out, he had been skeptical too. He had heard these words about the background, about this prickly Vietnamese leader who seemed a bit otherworldly and could be difficult to get along with. But all that fell away after he met Diem, and they got along very well indeed.

And one of the pillories that you often come across on the Left is that Nolting was not very bright, which is an absolute, outright falsehood. The man had won scholarships to Harvard. His professor there had been none other than — oh, the famous British mathematician and atheist, what was his name? Lord — oh, I'm sorry, I forget it now. But anyways, he had done very well at Harvard and had done very well in philosophy and up at the PhD level. So anyways, he was no dim ball, contrary to leftist accusations.

So the minute that Harriman gets back to D.C., to Washington, he starts plotting against Diem, and we have the files on that. We've got the documents. And from that point on, he started pitching the idea of having a coup and looking for another leader, and around him he'd built this cadre of likeminded liberal thinkers, such as John Kenneth Galbraith — then to become ambassador of India, a bit of a star in the JFK crowd — and Mike Forrestall and Roger Hilsman, National Security Advisor. So he'd built a very powerful team around him.

But in effect, he didn't even need that, because his own prestige was so substantial that, from eyewitness accounts, when they'd have White House meetings with Kennedy, it was more like Harriman telling Kennedy what was going to happen than Kennedy giving Harriman the instructions. In fact, Kennedy tended to bow out of the way when Harriman came online — although he wasn't happy entirely with what he

heard from Kennedy, and as we get towards the end of Diem's government in '63, he had Ambassador Nolting back in Washington giving him advice to the contrary.

But it was from that point forward, really, to cut to the chase for your listeners, that the planning was underway to get rid of Diem. So it was all according to his objections to what was going to go on in Laos. And the agreements were signed in '62 over strong objections from the Vietnamese and from Thailand and from others in the region. And of course the communists never honored it. In fact, they turned the Ho Chi Minh trail into a freeway system, just about, coming down through Laos, and the supplies and men picked up even forward, which, of course, threw South Vietnam onto this strategic defensive. It was so much the case that men like Bill Colby and people within the State Department who were not of the mind of Averell Harriman had a name for the Ho Chi Minh trail, and they called it the Averell Harriman Memorial Highway.

WOODS: (laughing) Oh, ouch.

SHAW: Yeah. Yeah, and that's in effect what it was, and the irony here is we had Harriman looking for this feather in his cap, this great diplomatic coup from being Roving Ambassador to Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia, of this legacy. Well, his legacy was the Ho Chi Minh trail. That is a fact. That is historical fact. And the documents are all there to support that.

So we then have the very wily Thich Tri Quang, leader of these radical Buddhists, who sensed the change in American media, through the American media, the mood of the stories going back to the U.S., and he played to that.

WOODS: Yeah, okay. Yeah, all right, so let me jump in on this. Now again, this is another thing that's in every textbook, and we're all taught it a certain way, that we had a group of Buddhists who immolated themselves; that is, they set themselves on fire, and this was said to be in protest of the harsh, repressive, Roman Catholic-dominated regime of Diem. And it's to my shame, here I am somebody who, I make a point of telling everybody on the show, day after day, about how you can't just listen to what your 7th grade teacher taught you; you've got to really dig a little bit deeper sometimes. And in the classroom, I taught this stuff. I taught it to people, and you are helping me do penance for this by being on the show. So tell me exactly then — there were Buddhists who burned themselves alive. That's true.

SHAW: Yes.

WOODS: But what exactly was — who were these people, basically, is the real question.

SHAW: Okay, the radical — and they were radical Buddhists, because, as other Buddhists will tell you, and indeed, Maggie Higgins, Margaret Higgins, a really good, in terms of digging deep and getting out there into the countryside, U.S. reporter, she interviewed various Buddhists in the countryside at the time this was going on, and they were all saying, who are these guys in Hue, at the Tu Dam Pagoda in Hue and the

Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon, these were the only two basically radical pagodas. And they said they're not acting like Buddhists, because they're getting involved in worldly politics, and Lord Buddha says not to meddle in such things but to amend your own life first and then you can be an example to others, but not to meddle in politics. And they couldn't understand this. So your average Buddhist and Buddhist monk in the countryside had nothing to do with the folks in the Tu Dam and Xa Loi Pagodas, and they wanted nothing to do with them. They said they weren't Buddhists. There was something terribly wrong there. So I'd like to underscore that point to your listeners.

So what was going on was we have this leader, Thich Tri Quang, and I already said he had very substantial communist connections. We've never found his name on the rolls of a communist pay book, but connections were there. So what he needed, he'd started a number of smaller riots and actually a quite substantial riot in Hue, remembering too that often in their demonstration banners just before the burning of the Buddhist monk in Saigon, he would have, the banners would be in Vietnamese and in English. So they were also for the American public, and of course he always called American reporters out to any of the demonstration events. So he was playing the U.S. He was a very clever fellow. He was playing to U.S. sensibilities. And of course this was being given a lot of time and a lot of air from both *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* and AP, Associated Press. And State Department cabal under Harriman was pretty well in league with a lot of the senior editors and saying, yeah, push for this. And they did, and Thich Tri Quang did.

So I'll get to now burning Buddhists now, so I don't forget that. The first one who burnt himself to death — oh, what was his name? Thich Tri Duc, if I remember right. He was known to Diem through his family doctor, who knew him too, knew the Buddhist monk. And this fellow had done what was common in a certain minority sect in Buddhism. They would make these suicide pacts, and it had nothing to do with politics. It had to do with a way of showing your commitment to Lord Buddha, that you would sacrifice yourself by fire to show total commitment to Buddha. This was frowned upon in mainstream Buddhism, but there was this small sect that had done it.

And news had gone through to Saigon that the fellow monk who he had had such a pact with had recently burned himself to death in China. And of course no one ever mentioned about what went on in China with the Buddhists. But anyways, he then thought, okay — so Thich Tri Quang got ahold of this, and he started manipulating Duc and saying, okay, you've got to do it too. You've got to live up to your pact — not telling him, of course, that they were going to use him as a protest to the Americans, or against the — and play it on American media. Diem got ahold of this, and they actually had Duc stood down from doing this. But then Quang got ahold of him again, and they compelled him basically, no, you've got to live up to your agreement. So he burned himself alive.

But Thich Tri Quang made sure that Malcolm Brown, he gave the Associated Press and all the American correspondents the place where to show up. He said something interesting will happen. Well, whenever Thich Tri Quang said something interesting will happen, something horrible happened. Bombs went off that they blamed the

government on or there would be a riot, and he blamed that on the government. So something interesting happened. The famous Buddhist in the fire, and Malcolm Brown, thanks to Thich Tri Quang, was there to catch it in all its horrible glory. The Buddhist in the flame. And of course, Quang and all of his associates were gathered around, and they were speaking through a loudspeaker, "A Buddhist monk burns himself in protest against prejudice against Buddhist from the Catholic government Diem." Well, it was an absolute farce. It was a total setup specifically and very cleverly for the American news media. And they of course ran with it. There were other protest later, and they know in several cases fellows were drugged.

Here's the interesting point, Tom. There were many — as far as the sect goes, and that doesn't mean huge numbers — Buddhist monks who burned themselves to death in North Vietnam and China and often in protest. And I doubt your listeners or any schoolteachers has ever heard of those.

WOODS: As a matter of fact — now, I could be wrong on this, but I could swear that years ago I read that after the communists took over in 1975, there were immolations after that. But who would care about that, because the communists are in charge, so nobody cares anymore.

SHAW: Well, they carried on — yes, exactly, you're right. Thich Tri Quang had an enormous effect on U.S. policy up until the mid '60s, because, yes, even after Diem, there were regular burnings in protest, and whenever the government and the Americans didn't do what he wanted, which was to let all communists out of jail, to be blunt, these protests would happen and people would burn themselves to death. So it was so obvious, but the emotion that was running high, especially from these young reporters like David Halberstam, who eventually earned his Pulitzer Prize out of this, and Malcolm Brown and Neil Sheehan, who claimed to be — you know, they would pillory Diem over his counterinsurgency efforts, mocking them, and they didn't know a darn thing about counterinsurgency, whereas the real experts who had defeated communist insurgency said Diem and Nhu were doing a remarkable job.

And Bill Colby was the bluntest of all. He said, look, it was a complete farce and a sideshow, the Buddhist crisis. They should have been suppressed a lot earlier. He almost castigated Diem and Nhu for waiting so long to actually shut down on them. But again, the press, it became a game in the press. And even back stateside, Dean Rusk, ostensibly the Secretary of State, told Nolting, and he said regardless of the facts, we just can't stand any more burnings in Vietnam. And that's what he meant. It was the bad media play, and it was affecting Kennedy too, and the whole idea that a Catholic president was protecting another Catholic in South Vietnam in the face of Buddhist persecution.

But here is the kicker that no one pays any attention to, and they should: the United Nations, no friend of people like Ngo Dinh Diem, sent out a commission to study the reality or the myth or even the possibility of religious persecution in Vietnam, and they came back and said — and it's on the record — there was no religious persecution in South Vietnam, especially against the Buddhists. So this was totally ignored in

popular history. There's just so much to it, but again, I should leave some for your readers (laughing).

WOODS: Yeah, that's right. I don't want them to — right, exactly. They should get it and read it. Let me tell you where I want to go now. Of course the decision to connive at the assassination of Diem. You know, there is a little bit of the gross naiveté that seems to inform so much American foreign policy, whereby the removal of one person we dislike will surely lead to a good outcome. I mean, it's incredible how many times they do this. But what I learned in particular, one of the other things I learned in your book, I didn't know anything about the social hierarchy in Vietnam, and I didn't realize that soldiers were so low in that hierarchy. And you even compare them to the way we would look at sanitation workers. They're doing a dirty but necessary job. So when you take somebody like Diem who was at the very top of that hierarchy and you replace him with someone who's at the bottom, the legitimacy is not there.

SHAW: Absolutely. You said it for me (laughing). But yes, the coup plotting that began, of course instigated by Averell Harriman and his cabal in Washington, filtered eventually to the CIA and to a fellow called Lucien Conein, who was to find some Vietnamese generals who would overthrow Diem. Now, yes, the arrogance and naiveté kind of rolled together. They didn't know, nor did they care about the Confucian order in Vietnam, and you're precisely right. At the top of the order is the scholarly gentleman, not necessarily rich — in fact, it's almost better if he's poor — but that he's a scholarly gentleman. This is why Ho Chi Minh tried to emulate that. Remember, he wasn't from that background, but he tried very hard to look like the scholarly, wise, old Vietnamese gentleman, what the called a *si*, I believe. Way down at the bottom of the level, as you've already identified for us, were the soldiers, the *binh*. So Washington thought they were going to replace a *si* with a *binh*, and there'd be no problem. Well, we know the problems.

WOODS: Yeah, it's a whole string of them, one after the other being replaced year after year.

SHAW: Well, a couple years there it didn't even take a year.

WOODS: Yeah, I was going to say, "year after year" is even making it sound too good.

SHAW: Yeah, it was the revolving door coup syndrome.

WOODS: Yeah, and of course you could just stop and think, do you think that was good or bad for the situation in South Vietnam where they were trying to fight a communist insurgency. And so this mistake, this is where we get back to your page 18, where you have a problem that doesn't exist, or even if it does exist, it's not really our issue anyway, but now you create a problem that can't be solved. And then this leads to U.S. government decisions to get more and more and more involved that wouldn't have been necessary if this decision — so is that your view? None of what happened later would have been necessary?

SHAW: Absolutely. They created a political vacuum by getting rid of the one man in South Vietnam who could hold it together because he had the Confucian Mandate of Heaven. He had the moral authority, in the eyes of the Vietnamese. And even those who didn't like him, they still respected him and that authority he had. You removed him and you put soldiers in his place, you created the ultimate political vacuum. We saw what happened in Iraq. You remove Saddam, and you have all kinds of — it's like taking the lid off Pandora's box.

Well, similarly in South Vietnam, where you had a good man, not a Saddam, Ngo Dinh Diem removed from power, well, Pandora's box, the lid just didn't come open; you tore it apart, and there was absolute chaos and a power vacuum where literally you had almost to 1966 with Thich Tri Quang, under the wing of the U.S. ambassador there, Henry Cabot Lodge, calling the shots for what was going on, and the soldiers just throwing one after the other out the window — not literally, but in coup after coup. It took years, years — and this is why, again, the counterinsurgency immediately upon Diem's death, the whole Strategic Hamlet Program was abandoned, and of course the communists started rampaging across the countryside. The whole thing was falling apart overnight. If the U.S. hadn't moved troops in to solidify that situation in '65, it would have been gone, and it would have been gone in '65. So they had to do that. They were morally committed, and it's a terrible thing it was necessary.

Now, eventually after years of much suffering and pain, things did solidify somewhat under President Thieu, who, by the way, even though he had been in on coup, had insisted, like General Tran Van Don, that nothing happened to Ngo Dinh Diem, that they would need him at least as a figurehead because of his enormous —

WOODS: Oh, yeah, that reminds me. Isn't it supposedly the fact that Kennedy himself hadn't realized that the coup would actually involve the murder of the guy? How much truth is there in that?

SHAW: Well, in Kennedy's case, I think it was true, but the people who were dealing, from Harriman down to Lucien Conein, who were dealing with General Duong Van Minh — "Big Minh," as they called him, because he was big for Vietnamese size — they knew that he had lost face earlier, many years earlier, because they caught him literally with his hands in the till, and Nhu wanted him jailed, but Diem, who was always a bit of a softhearted man, said, oh, let's leave him a summary — he kept him upstairs. But anyways, Big Minh had been nurturing a fairly substantial hatred, and I heard this from General Khanh, for years against them. And to make him the leader of the coup was guaranteed that he would have them murdered, because he had a personal hitman, who Khanh told me used to notch his victims on his pistol, and he's the one who did the terrible murder and really the gutting of Ngo Dinh Diem and Nhu on that horrible day in 1963, November 2nd.

WOODS: All right, one more thing I want to know is to what extent did people, either in the U.S. public or in South Vietnam or in North Vietnam, to what extend did they know of U.S. involvement in the decision to go ahead with the assassination?

SHAW: Well, the North knew, and in fact, the North —

WOODS: Yeah, so what was their reaction to that? So wait a minute. The Americans gave the green light to overthrow this guy? Of all people in the history of the world they could overthrow, they picked this one?

SHAW: Well, amongst the communist leadership who knew Diem, all the false pretexts about him being an American puppet, that all fell away, and they actually reached out to him, and through the French ambassador, they sent a message to Diem through Ho Chi Minh, said, look, we know you're a patriot in your own right, and if you want to have some kind of neutral agreement with us, we'll respect it and we can trade goods, North and South. But they said our one underscoring feature to all of these negotiations is the Americans have to be out of there. And that didn't go anywhere, but they were reaching out to him. Even the French, who had earlier been ticked off at Diem, were trying to save him then. They had read the cards, and they said, look, the White House is turning on you. They told this to Nhu, and Diem wouldn't — he queried this through Nolting, and Nolting checked with JFK just before he left Vietnam if in fact support was still there, and he relayed that to Diem that it was. But in fact it wasn't. But Diem found it very difficult to actually turn against the Americans. He couldn't. It wasn't in his nature. But the fact is that they had turned against him, at least the upper level. Did JFK know he would be murdered? No, I don't think JFK did —

WOODS: Okay.

SHAW: — because he looked absolutely — from all accounts, he turned sort of an ashen gray the minute he heard, and he fled the Oval Office the minute he heard it. It may be a premonition of his own death. I don't know, but the eyewitness accounts said he was absolutely shocked and stunned. Guys like Roger Hilsman, yes, they knew. He was actually quite callous about it. And others even thought it temporarily was a good thing. All of them, except for Roger Hilsman, including Averell Harriman, they later recanted, and they blamed each other. Ambassador Lodge blamed Harriman; Harriman blamed Lodge. It went back — this is the interesting thing. All these men who thought it was such a wonderful thing recanted.

Even Halberstam out there when the Buddhist crises were going on was interviewed by Maggie Higgins, and she said, well, you must be very proud of all this, where is your objective reporting. And he said, look, we always have said that what we were doing was political. We're against this government. And he outright admitted that. And the thing was that they had never said that before. They had always painted it as Diem: bad. That was their objective opinion. But he basically admitted to Maggie Higgins that they weren't concerned with being objected.

So the whole thing, as we've seen, became a terrible mess. And without U.S. force it would have fallen to the communists, and that was all through the murder of Ngo Dinh Diem.

WOODS: Well, it's really — I just can't get over it. I don't even remember who pointed your book out to me, so if you're listening, thank you very much, because I wouldn't have found out about it myself. Although I do get the Ignatius Press catalogue, so somehow it just flew right over my head. But I'm telling you, what you've done is such a skillfully executed case of the best kind of historical revisionism. There's a lot of bad revisionism out there, where they take things that are true and then they screw with them. But this is something that we've long believed and that, as I say, I myself taught in the classroom. And then I read your book, and I just started hitting my head, saying, oh, was I duped? I can't believe it. Anyway, I'm glad to — better to know the truth later than not to know it at all. So the book once again is *The Lost Mandate of Heaven*. We're going to be linking to it on today's show notes page, which is TomWoods.com/645. Geoffrey Shaw, thanks so much for your time today.

SHAW: Well, thanks for having me, Tom, and if you ever want to talk about the internal workings of the Buddhist crisis, I'd be only too happy to go over that.

WOODS: And the thing is at the end of my show, there's a line in the outro about "30 minutes a day," and I think I've doubled that today, so I think this was as much as we could do (laughing) — for me to maintain my own credibility here.

SHAW: Okay, well one final thought, Tom, is I was in the same boat as you as a military historian when I first came across this story. You know, I just, okay, Diem, you know, corrupt South Vietnamese dictator, okay. I wanted to look at the armies, but I quickly realized the problem in South Vietnam wasn't the military. It was political. And I had to look closer and closer at Diem, and things didn't add up. And the more I listened to the Vietnamese, the more they didn't add up. And when I listened to good, viable American sources, from Bill Colby and Ambassador Nolting, you got a completely different picture. So I was in the same boat as you, so don't feel bad.

WOODS: Okay, I feel somewhat better. All right, thank again. I appreciate your time.

SHAW: Thanks, Tom.