made Rusi a scapegoat in the eyes of the wide news-watching audiences if information about it had not been leaked to the media and if the media had not made a scandal out of it. The media worked in favor of the slanderers, either knowingly or out of laziness, presenting the case as if Rusi was assumed to be guilty by default.

The Rusi case has been thoroughly sorted out (a court case also found the state guilty of groundless indictment), but the discussion the book inspires should only be starting. The authors deserve thanks for getting the truth out, helping to deter would-be slanderers in the future. Campaigns of defamation still occur, however. In our golden age of “fake news” we should be less worried about Internet trolls and more vigilant about professionally orchestrated kompromat operations, of which the Rusi case is an unusually blatant example.

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Based on official documents, oral histories, and memoirs, *So Much to Lose*, by William J. Rust, a senior journalist and communications consultant, examines a lesser-known case in the foreign policy records of the Kennedy administration; namely, John F. Kennedy’s policy in Laos.

This informative book has an introduction, eleven chapters, and an epilogue. The introduction provides an overview of Kennedy’s policy in Laos in the context of U.S.-Soviet confrontation in the 1960s. Chapters 1–7 reveal how Laos was neutralized through the ratification of the Geneva Accords in July 1962. Rust portrays the three competing Laotian factions (i.e., neutral, rightwing, and leftwing), and their interactions with the high-level diplomatic elites in the Kennedy administration. Chapters 8–11 analyze how and why Laos’s neutral status collapsed. In the epilogue, Rust describes the sudden end of Kennedy’s policy in Laos, which led to more bloody armed conflicts than those in the pre-Geneva era. Three useful appendices conclude the book. The first two are full copies of the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos and the Protocol to the Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. The third is a complete declassified version of a memorandum for President Kennedy, dated 17 June 1963.

Kennedy’s tenure as president was too brief to allow for a clear assessment of his policy toward Laos. One result of Kennedy’s untimely death is that his administration had no time to adjust its policy in Laos and deal with the gradually escalating situation in Vietnam.

One of Rust’s most valuable contributions is his in-depth analysis of the reasons that Kennedy’s policy toward Laos met with setbacks. First, the policy was insincere.
Officially, the U.S. president advocated Laotian neutrality and the establishment of a coalition government that would include the three factions, but his real intention was to support the rightwing faction that would “prevent further expansion of Communist control in Laos” (p. 267). As a result, Kennedy’s policy in Laos seemed uncertain, even contradictory to some extent, and made no significant progress toward its goal.

Second, because of the limited amount of intelligence available from Laos and the Soviet Union, Kennedy misjudged the tense situation. For example, although the three factions in the 1960s had been trying to achieve dominance in Laos, no faction was likely to prevail over the others in the long run.

Worse, Kennedy exaggerated the strategic significance of Laos. To the Soviet Union, Laos was strategically insignificant. When the three factions did not abide by their Geneva commitments, Kennedy turned to Nikita Khrushchev for help in restoring the Geneva Accords to full operation. However, Kennedy’s overtures to the Soviet Union failed. According to Khrushchev, the Soviet Union had “a limited ability to influence” the competing factions (p. 211). Possibly alone among Kennedy’s advisors, Averell Harriman concluded that “the Soviet Union shared the U.S. interest in reducing East-West tensions,” especially in Laos, a country of less strategic importance to both parties (p. 144).

Third, Kennedy’s policy in Laos shifted during his presidency. On the one hand, he worried that any misunderstanding between the United States and the Soviet Union “might trigger a nuclear war” (p. 118). Therefore, Kennedy and his advisers made great efforts to pursue a negotiated settlement of the Laotian factional conflicts. On the other hand, Kennedy believed that the threat of U.S. military intervention could deter “the advancement of antigovernment forces” in Laos (p. 129). At the Geneva conference on 2 July 1962, the Kennedy administration advocated “the continued presence of foreign civilians who performed military-support functions” (p. 143).

The book would have benefited from greater attention to another component of the story; namely, China’s influence on Kennedy’s policy toward Laos. This omission from Rust’s book raises three questions for future research. What were the relationships between China and the three factions in Laos? How did Kennedy and his advisers view China—Laos’s giant neighbor—after the Soviet Union refused to help U.S. officials restore the Geneva Accords? How did the intensification of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the early 1960s affect U.S. policy toward Laos? Readers will have to await the arrival of new evidence to answer these questions.

So Much to Lose is a wonderful addition to the literature of Cold War history and Kennedy studies. It not only marshals an impressive array of material from a wide variety of sources, but also provides academics with a wealth of new quotations. Rust’s book can be highly recommended to scholars of Laos and Cold War studies and to students pursuing research topics related to Laos or Southeast Asia during the Cold War.