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The Best and the Brightest: A Critique

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The U.S. participation in Vietnam is, and will remain for generations, the most traumatic occurrence in our national life. This critique of David Halberstam's book, The Best and the Brightest, helps to illuminate the processes which shaped U.S. policy in Vietnam and, indeed, continue to shape policy today. The question is not whether Mr. Halberstam is right or wrong or whether the reviewer is right or wrong. Both are part of the continuing dialog on Vietnam which, hopefully, in the end will help us to understand ourselves and our processes of government.

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST: A CRITIQUE

by

Captain Wesley K. Clark, U.S. Army

Those who believe that our involvement in Southeast Asia has been a disastrous mistake will enjoy reading David Halberstam's attempt to parcel out the blame. As brilliantly stylized reporting, *The Best and the Brightest** is marvelously right: backgrounds of the players skillfully interwoven with the flow of events; insiders' humor, often bitter, injected at appropriate points; and the right sort of speculations and generalizations to cement the narrative. The book is also, however, an over-dramatic, undocumented, and finally ambiguous account of American involvement in Southeast Asia.

Halberstam's account of American intervention in Indochina begins with

Roosevelt, who was an instinctive anti-colonialist. Roosevelt's death, the development of the cold war, the fall of China to communism, and the Korean war encouraged the highly ideological foreign policy in the fifties. Anti-communism was "an ideological and bipartisan movement; it enjoyed the support of the press, the churches, of Hollywood. There was stunningly little debate or sophistication of the levels of anticommunism. It was totally centrist and politically safe." p. 108 Domestic political pressures thus acted to constrain successive administrations. The first American commitment in Indochina was arranged by Acheson in 1950. A much more costly commitment, resulting from French military defeats, was narrowly avoided in 1954, thanks largely to Gen. Matthew Ridgway, then Army Chief of Staff. Dulles, however, was intent to enforce containment in

*David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (Random House, 1972). Subsequently all references to this book will be

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Asia and maneuvered the United States into a commitment to South Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries.

The American commitment in South Vietnam was not based on a realistic analysis of the country or its leadership, Halberstam tells us.

During the war the Viet Minh had done more than expel the French. They had taken Vietnamese society, which under colonial rule had been so fragmented and distrustful, where only loyalty to family had counted, and given it a broader cause and meaning, until that which bound them together was more powerful than that which divided them. This, then, had made them a nation in the true sense. P. 146

Diem was inherently inadequate to provide leadership in the South, Halberstam maintains, because,

he was an American creation which fit American political needs and desires, and not Vietnamese ones. By Vietnamese standards there was little legitimacy; Diem was a Catholic in a Buddhist country, a Central Vietnamese in the South, but most important of all he was mandarin, a member of the feudal aristocracy, in a country swept by revolution. P. 147

By implication, then, prospects for a non-Communist, independent South Vietnam, as presented by Halberstam, would seem to be hopeless from the earliest commitments.

Neither the sequence of events which Halberstam describes nor the causality he imputes in the pre-1961 period is original, though both are presented clearly and effectively. However, his analysis of South Vietnam itself is one of the weaker portions of the book. Contradictions are apparent. Thus, Diem is "neither Asian nor Western." yet he is "mandarin." P. 147 The work of Ho made Vietnam "a nation in the true sense." P. 146 yet Diem lacked le-

gitimacy because he was a "Central Vietnamese in the South." P. 147 In fact, Diem had some genuine nationalist credentials despite his absence from the country in the early 1950's.¹ Nor is it clear that Vietnam was in fact a nation. Viet Minh efforts had not succeeded well in the South, and loyalty seemed to remain with the family, the village, and the sect, as it had always been. Halberstam's analysis of Vietnamese society is very superficial: social conditions in the South are never related to Vietnamese history; the legacy of French colonialism is left largely untouched; and problems with the administrative structure which Diem inherited are ignored. In fact, Halberstam's judgments of Vietnam are based on the same scanty investigations for which he has criticized the policymakers. If it is true that American power was not applicable to Vietnam, that Vietnamese society had been revolutionized beyond the point of any reversal or modification by outside forces, a more detailed analysis than Halberstam's will be required to prove these statements. They are not self-evident.

But, to be fair, Halberstam's concern is primarily with the men who led the United States into ever-deepening involvement in Southeast Asia during the 1960's. These inheritors of the bipartisan anti-Communist policy of the fifties were, of course, the Kennedy team, "the best and the brightest." They swept into office, says Halberstam,

with an exciting sense of American elitism, a sense that they had been summoned forth from the country to harness this dream of a new American nationalism, bringing a new, strong, dynamic spirit to our historic role in world affairs... their image was of virility; they played squash and handball to stay in shape, wrote books and won prizes (even the President had won a Pulitzer

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Prize), climbed mountains to clear their minds. Many of them read poetry and some were said to be able to quote it.^{p. 40}

Yet, even these great men, drawn from the top ranks of corporate, educational, and philanthropic leadership, were unable to reverse the course of American policy in Indochina.

Halberstam's procedure is to examine these stalemated and powerful men, to assess their backgrounds and characters, and to portray their interactions in order to elucidate the leadership styles and endemic forces impelling American commitment in Southeast Asia. In particular, he endeavors to show how the individual personalities of so many impressive men resulted in the flow of policy decisions which determined the conduct of the war. But Halberstam exceeds the who-did-what-to-whom approach to decisionmaking to consider not only bureaucratic politics but also implicitly to evaluate the policies that resulted. This assessment of his work examines the soundness of his personality-oriented approach to the politics of foreign policy, the influences by and upon the bureaucracies involved in the conduct of the war, and the adequacies of his evaluation of the policies.

When he discusses men's backgrounds and characters, Halberstam is detailed and often dramatic, and he makes concerted efforts to link men's backgrounds and personalities to their roles and decisions. The military architect of the war was Taylor—"a mind to master facts rather than to challenge them"^{p. 469}... believing in the reporting system which he orchestrated, unable to acknowledge the failure of the Kennedy limited commitment."^{p. 460} Taylor's strength was compounded by the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara—"the mind was mathematical, analytical, bringing order and reason out of chaos"^{p. 217}... Taking on a guerilla war was like buying a sick foreign company; you brought your systems to

it... He knew nothing about Asia"...^{p. 214} After Kennedy's death, McNamara moved into a major role and quickly became committed to the policies he evaluated. His doubts on the war came too late. The man who should have provided the expert knowledge of Vietnam, as well as resistance to the military, was Secretary of State Dean Rusk—"a modest man: a symbol, in personal style, of a passing era"^{p. 311}... An extremely good diplomat"^{p. 310}... Rusk hated to challenge the military on its needs and requests because he feared a State-Defense split... and would do almost anything to avoid it."^{p. 307} Halberstam investigates a host of less important but still influential players, each of whom echoes the dominant theme of misplaced power.

Also, Halberstam takes us to the Presidents themselves. Kennedy is portrayed as "committed only to rationality and brains, nothing more... as a political figure he was cautious and almost timid,"^{p. 96} thus explaining why Kennedy extended our commitment in Vietnam after his confrontation with Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961. Lyndon Johnson inherited a substantial problem in Vietnam. And how Halberstam shines when he discusses Johnson! All Johnson's style derived from his boyhood background and senatorial experience: "...if you were a serious man and wanted to get things done, you had to do them for people. Manipulate, but manipulate for their own good."^{p. 44} As for the policies to be followed, Johnson's background again: No one was going to push Lyndon Johnson around. Lyndon Johnson knew something about people like this, like the Mexicans back home, they were all right, the Mexicans, but

if you didn't watch, they'll come right into your yard and take it over if you let them. And the next day they'll be right there on your porch, barefoot and weighing one

hundred and thirty pounds and they'll take that too. But if you say to them right at the start, "Hold on, just wait a minute," they'll know they're dealing with somebody who'll stand up. And after that you can get along fine. P. 530-31

Johnson is portrayed as the most tragic figure of them all, so powerful and experienced in government—"His genes were seemingly larger and more demanding than those of other men . . . the perfectly prepared and trained and tuned parliamentary leader" P. 436—concerned with the Great Society, yet powerless to deal with North Vietnam—"a raggedy-ass little fourth rate country," P. 512 Johnson called it.

As a broad brush, journalistic account of the bureaucratic interplay involved in policy formulation on Vietnam, Halberstam's account seems generally correct. Taylor did play a very large role in the decisions on the war, McNamara emerged in the 1963-1966 period as a powerful advocate of the military approach, Dean Rusk did seem to remain primarily in a supportive role for the policy choices initiated by others. While the overview differs little in certain particulars from many other accounts of the era, it is nevertheless useful for its sweeping perspective of the period 1961-1966.

But Halberstam's account is meant to be interpretive and analytical. In order to portray how and why policies emerged as they did, Halberstam has plausibly reconstructed the characters and motivations of the men involved. He has provided graphic and convincing accounts of the leadership groups which Henry Kissinger, writing in 1966, described as pragmatic rather than idealistic or charismatic:

The main example [for the bureaucratic-pragmatic] this type of leadership is the American elite

Because pragmatism is based on the conviction that the context of events produces a solution, there is a tendency to await developments . . . every problem will yield if attacked with sufficient energy. It is inconceivable, therefore that delay might result in irretrievable disaster. Technical issues enjoy more careful attention and receive more sophisticated attention than political ones.

The *ad hoc* tendency of our decision makers . . . produces a relatively low valuation of historical factors . . . Great weight is given to what people say and relatively little to the significance of these affirmations in terms of the domestic structure or historical background.²

It is just these characteristics writ large which Halberstam has beautifully portrayed. The epithets, the anecdotes, the flow of the narrative—all echo so forcefully through the reader's mind. Not only are governmental politics and the interplay of so many fascinating men recorded in great detail, but also a variety of background material, individual biographies, and reasoned speculation is presented to explain the influences on and motives of the great men. All in all, the *Best and the Brightest* is a prodigious effort to provide a new dimension to our understanding of American policy in Southeast Asia; and certainly Mr. Halberstam has persuaded a great many people to read of a war of which they tired long ago.

Yet for all its novelistic plausibility—and it is plausible—Halberstam's exciting and well-written story is not a compelling or complete account of the bureaucratic politics of involvement for several reasons. First, the account is largely undocumented, as one might expect of Halberstam's journalistic approach. One has no way of verifying many of the attitudes and motives

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which Halberstam attributes to his characters. References are given in the most general terms, and then the account seems to be fundamentally the views of the in-house critics, the losers in the game for power—Harriman, Hilsman, Forrestal, Ball, *et al.* And Halberstam does, after all, make his favorites and his villains quite clear.³ Any interpretation of history involves sorting the significant from the insignificant, but it is exactly Halberstam's judgment in this area which, in the absence of references and citations from both sides of the power plays, must remain largely unverifiable. Moreover, the lack of citations and his choice of sources are even more damaging since Halberstam is concerned not merely to describe events, documents, or even conversations, but, additionally, to unify all the preceding in the portrayal of personality and character. Biases of the sources, their recollections of incidents and conversations, and their particular judgments of policies must inevitably influence such a personal approach to history. It is not apparent that Halberstam has troubled to avoid such distortions.

Nor is it clear in what instances the characters and personalities of the leaders themselves have causal or even explanatory significance. For example, one of Halberstam's basic themes is that the hubris or arrogant self-confidence of American leadership prevented acknowledgment of the difficulties of U.S. policies and their significant alteration.⁴ But, though the leaders themselves appeared to exhibit a certain confidence in their talents, Halberstam does not demonstrate that these personal attitudes were primary, or even significant, causal factors in policy decisions when measured against manifold reasons and pressures influencing particular policy choices. The influence of pride, in particular, can only be hypothesized, and the larger issue of the significance of personal character in decisionmaking as presented by Halberstam is often per-

plexing. On the issue of bombing the North in 1965, the coldly rationalistic McGeorge Bundy responded out of character.⁵ Conversely, Halberstam's interpretation of some personalities rings suspiciously *post hoc*, as though his assessments could not have been made independently of the individuals' involvement in Vietnam. The importance of personality in decisions made by the leaders of government is hard to doubt, and Halberstam is rather convincing in his portrayal of Lyndon Johnson, yet the actual significance of personality and character must remain uncertain despite Halberstam's efforts.

Further, Halberstam's concentration on the political maneuverings of the major policy figures assumes that the results of such political games impacted significantly on the actual policies. While this assumption may be valid, it is only fair to note that in some instances the outcomes of struggles for influence may have had negligible longrun effect. For example, the absence of Hilsman and Forrestal, both "doves" from policy circles after 1964 is hailed by Halberstam as a significant factor in escalating the war.⁶ Yet, according to Hilsman's analysis, no significant alteration of the level of violence in Vietnam was likely, even if his group at State had prevailed over the Joint Chiefs. Quoting from a memorandum which he circulated in the State Department in 1963, Hilsman says: "The problem presented by the Viet Cong is by no means just a military problem. It is more accurately described as a problem in political and economic and social measures. The *first essential* is to provide the villager with physical security . . ." ⁶ [Italic added.] Thus, military force would have been necessary as a precondition to any other measures. Provision of physical security would not have been easy. Nor, of course, is there any guarantee that this protection, even if initially provided, would have reduced the level of violence. As long as Americans were com-

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mitted to the maintenance of an independent South Vietnam, there would be at least the threat of the application of force, and as long as either side felt that its position could be improved by force, escalation would be inevitable.⁷ Thus, certain policies appear unavoidable, regardless of who proposed or who opposed them; the motivations and character of the players in such instances appear unimportant.

Yet another consideration mitigating against the causal accountability of the leaders themselves, and hence the importance of Halberstam's principal thrust, is the influence of many bureaucratic institutions, such as MACV, CINCPAC, AID, and the Department of State. It is often suggested that foreign policy can be viewed in three senses as bureaucratic or institutional output. First, actual occurrences, such as the employment of airpower in Southeast Asia, are organizational outputs. Second, the options of governmental leaders are constrained by the existing capabilities of institutions to execute policy. Third, organizational outputs structure the situation in which leaders must make their decisions by providing information, raising issues, and generating preconditions which color the issues.⁸ By constraining options and structuring situations, the roles of these institutions are very relevant to Halberstam's story of American involvement in Vietnam.

Halberstam is aware that the men did not stand isolated on the policy stage. He does attempt to portray the impact of organizations upon the "best and the brightest," and apparently feels that some responsibility for both the involvement itself and the particulars of that involvement must rest on the bureaucracies.

In a reiterative if-only theme, Halberstam bemoans the unequal competition between the military and civilian bureaucracies. It was a contest unequal from the beginning, Halberstam says,

The McCarthy purge had robbed the State Department of its finest talent, of those men who would have served at the crucial level of Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs; the best men had been driven out for losing China, Halberstam maintains. Arrayed against State was an intrinsically powerful military bureaucracy. In the very mechanics of policymaking the military had an advantage: "The military could just announce a policy on areas where there had been a vacuum, and it was the civilians who would have to fight back. Even worse, the military could gain the upper hand by asking for too much, then, like a shrewd bargainer, settle for a little less."^{p. 211}

But what was the significance of this unequal competition? Did it alter the course of the war? Would the presence of John Stewart Service or John Paton Davies have been significant, and if so, how? Halberstam never extends his analysis.

Nor does he really investigate the extent and capabilities of the civilian bureaucracy. For example, to rephrase Halberstam, why couldn't the *civilians* announce a policy on areas where there had been a vacuum and make the military fight back? Maxwell Taylor supplies a possible answer in his memoirs:

The nonmilitary agencies involved were not manned by operator types and knew little about that kind of planning and programming. State, which should have assumed a supervisory and coordinating role in the interrelated departmental activities in Washington was staffed largely with foreign service officers trained to observe and report events but not accustomed to taking action about them. AID and USIA were new elements in the executive structure without a core of career experts to provide personnel stability and depth . . .

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As a result the Pentagon and CIA-sponsored programs got off to a relatively fast start, whereas the political, economic, and information programs moved very slowly. Unequal progress among our programs plagued us for years.⁹

Is this the reason so many options emphasized the escalation of violence? Could a responsive and active civilian bureaucracy in South Vietnam have changed the conduct of the war and hence the situation in which the leaders acted? Halberstam cannot say.

Instead he devotes attention to the military's demands for more men, more material, more violence, implying a mysterious and irresistible force, but here again, his analysis is superficial. We are told that "all institutions want their thing; in the case of the military, wanting troops is their thing."¹⁰ Yet, he himself presents two conflicting views of military self-interest—Ridgway in 1954 and Harold K. Johnson in 1965. If it is true that institutions tend to respond in predictable patterns, why did these two spokesmen for the Army differ in their estimates of military interest?

Even though the military did request more men and materiel repeatedly during the Vietnam war, this was hardly mysterious. The military, to use Samuel Huntington's phrase, is charged with the management of violence, and the Vietcong, the opposition, were seldom reluctant to use their own forms of violence. The military came to view the war as resolvable through the application of force because the physical security of the populace was the necessary precondition for nonviolent political and economic development, and the forces available proved inadequate to maintain this physical security.

Nor is Halberstam clear on the extent to which the impetus of the military bureaucracy was irresistible. Would different military leadership have kept us

from the war; for instance, a Ridgway rather than a Harold K. Johnson? Or was the military leadership—and hence the civilian leadership—merely responding to the options and structured situations generated by the institutions? Halberstam hints at possible explanatory factors: that the use of force appealed to dynamic Presidents and other leaders, that the military could take up *machismo* while the civilians were made to appear doubting and uncertain, that it is intrinsically easier to be an advocate than a doubter.¹¹ Each of these ideas provides valid clues to the influence of the military and, by implication, civilian bureaucracies. (They also support Halberstam's dramaturgy nicely.)

But Halberstam is finally unable to determine the extent of organizational impact on the decisionmakers because his analysis lacks depth. For example, what institutional policies and standard operating procedures were critical in forcing policy choices and foreclosing options? If the Navy had secured better coordination with the South Vietnamese gunboats on Operation 34A, would the Gulf of Tonkin incident have been avoided? If stationing aircraft in South Vietnam necessitated the dispatch of American ground troops to provide security, what institutional procedures directed that aircraft be so positioned?

Without a close examination of the institutions themselves, the modes and significance of their impact upon the policymakers cannot be accurately determined. Thus, who must shoulder responsibility for the overly optimistic reporting in the early 1960's? Taylor and Harkins, the military leaders, by their active intervention, or the organization itself, for passively allowing information favorable to its superiors to surface, or the civilian authorities (McNamara, *et al.*) for failing to examine critically the favorable reports? Halberstam is finally ambivalent.¹²

Again, who is responsible for the Gulf of Tonkin incident; the Navy, the President, earlier advisers who encouraged the covert use of force? To be sure, determination of responsibility can never be complete, but Halberstam's analysis of organizational contexts, characters, and policies is simply inadequate to separate the influences of the leaders' personalities and intentions from the bureaucracies' presentations of options and structurings of decisions. And this is, of course, the central point of Halberstam's account.

In addition to treating superficially the impact of bureaucracies on the war, Halberstam inadequately examines the effect of the war on the bureaucracies and in particular, the military. The potential significance of the war's effect on the military should not be discounted, for while the "best and the brightest" typically remain in the councils of national policy only briefly, the military organizations will persist and will present options, structure situations, and implement policies for future decisionmakers. Halberstam concisely describes the war's impact on the Army:

The war, of course, had ravaged the Army; the kind of officer Taylor sought for the Army suffered because of it and was increasingly driven out of the service. A bad war means a bad system; the wrong officers are promoted for the wrong reasons, the best officers, often unable to go along with the expected norms, the fake body count, the excessive use of force, wither along the way. And the gap between the Army and society did not close, it widened; there was a growing sense of anti-military feeling in the country, and the Army was, of course, selected as the scapegoat. p. 657-58

Needless to say, such dramatic pronouncements, not founded on evidence or analysis,¹¹ heighten the tragic theme

of the story but do little to advance the reader's understanding of the issues involved. Indeed, this glib treatment might intensify the alleged effects Halberstam bemoans. While this is no place for an exhaustive investigation of the effects of the war on the Army, perhaps it might be helpful to sketch the important issues.

The quality of the officer corps is rightly a matter of concern, but precisely how that quality is to be assessed is contentious. Should quality be determined on the basis of past performance (through efficiency reports and decorations), on the basis of potential (educational attainment, leadership skills, health), on the basis of some combination of the above, or on qualities such as moral courage or personal integrity? To almost any specific measure many objections could be raised.

When some acceptable measure of quality is developed, it must be applied in relation to the Army's needs. How many of the brightest officers should the Army have retained when it reduced its strength from 1968 to 1972 by approximately 40 percent? Will men who led capably in combat be equally effective leaders in training and garrison? To what extent can officers' limitations be ameliorated by effective schooling and wide experience? Each question is relevant to the degree of quality, however defined, which the Army should seek to retain in peacetime.

The gap between the Army and society to which Halberstam refers seems questionable as well. Perhaps the war has had a major role in reducing overall respect for authority, as James Reston suggests,¹² and the Army, as an authoritarian institution, has suffered lost prestige along with Government, educators, and law enforcement. Congress and the Nation seem determined to accord domestic needs higher priority, and the Army, as an institution primarily designed to project national power abroad, may have more difficulty

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with particular appropriations.¹³

While this is not the place to examine more fully the impact of the war upon the Army, it should be evident that Halberstam's generalities hardly present a complete or correct assessment. Instead, those generalities are merely indicative of the manner in which Halberstam uses the bureaucracies as sometimes mysterious and often superficial props in his dramatic portrayal of the interactions and influences of the tragic heroes of his story.

And yet, within this excessive concentration on the personalities of the policymakers, Halberstam is unable to avoid a critical overview of the framework of U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam, and, like his examination of the bureaucracies, it, too, is inadequate.

Halberstam's overview of policies provides the basic theme of tragedy around which each of the policymakers is evaluated. And it is this overview through which Halberstam seems to offer hope that different men, men without the tragic flaws of character of the major leaders, stronger men more aware of America's weaknesses, might have avoided the long American involvement in Southeast Asia. Thus the basic cause for difficulty in American foreign policy was that:

The Kennedy administration did not reevaluate any of the Eisenhower conceptions in Asia (conceptions which Dulles had tailored carefully to the disposition of the McCarthy group in the Senate); if anything, the Kennedy people would set out to upgrade and modernize the means to carry out these policies. Later, as their policies floundered in Vietnam, they would lash out in frustration at their own personnel, at the reporters, at the incompetence of the client government. What they did not realize was that the problem was not just American personnel, which was often incompetent,

nor the governmental reporting, which was highly dishonest, nor the client government, which was just as bad as the worst critics claimed—the real problem was the failure to reexamine the assumptions of the era, particularly in Southeast Asia.^{P. 145}

Though Halberstam never explicitly states the assumptions, close reading suggests that they might fall into two categories: assumptions about the American world role and assumptions about the applicability of force to the Vietnam situation. Halberstam seems to suggest that a reasonable man, reevaluating such factors as the Sino-Soviet split, the nature of the war in South Vietnam, the moral implications of using force, the domino theory, and a host of other ideas would simply have concluded that the United States ought not to become involved and if already involved ought to liquidate the commitment quickly.

But while he implies that the assumptions supporting the American involvement were invalid, Halberstam has failed to deal directly with these assumptions. What did the Sino-Soviet split imply for an America concerned with deterrence in a global confrontation of powers? Was the revolutionary mandate of the Viet Minh so strong in 1954 or 1964 that no non-Communist nationalism could be sustained? Would the amorality of American policy necessarily destroy its efficacy? Would a show of irresolution in Vietnam weaken the credibility of American commitments elsewhere? Each of these is a complex and oft-debated question relevant to an evaluation of American policy in Vietnam, and while Halberstam's evaluation sets the critical theme of tragedy, he in no way deals directly with any of the above questions. In view of the apparent success of President Nixon's policies of disengagement from Vietnam—his willingness to increase the use of force, linkages to global problems and issues,

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development of South Vietnamese self-sufficiency, and negotiating from positions of strength—many of the American assumptions supporting the involvement may have been correct.

However, many enlightened men have differed in their findings on just these questions, and Mr. Halberstam is certainly entitled to his beliefs. The inadequacy of his treatment lies not so much in his conclusions, though I believe his foreign policy views to be incorrect, as in his methods. His indirect, journalistic approach to important assumptions of policy enables him to pass judgment quite clearly and quite forcefully on American policy, but to pass judgment through nuance and innuendo rather than in a forthright examination.

Moreover, the indirect manner in which Halberstam approaches the basic policies and their justifications obscures the very cogent arguments which inevitably influenced the decisionmakers. For example, from the perspective of the early sixties, the world was ruled by force and threat of force. Tension over Berlin, Soviet and Chinese involvement in Africa, Khrushchev's famous speech on wars of national liberation, and the Geneva Accords on Laos demonstrated the dimensions of global conflict and power. True, Soviet and Chinese interests had begun to conflict, and Ho was not merely a puppet of the Soviet Union or China; but a logical case, founded on the necessity to maintain the credibility of American commitments, could be made for the early and continued commitment in Indochina.¹⁴ A more detailed recognition by Halberstam of the many reasons which supported the leaders' decisions would have usefully supplemented his bureaucratic politics approach to policy. For though policies may often be the political resultant of bargaining and compromise, and while they may well bear the stamp of particular personalities, surely some policies are also understood

through their rationales. Moreover, greater attention to reasons and rationales would have ameliorated Halberstam's occasional tendency to disparage personalities.¹⁵

Yet it is Halberstam's disdain for deep analysis and his meticulously developed focus on personality that make *The Best and the Brightest* so forceful, so appealing, and so disturbing. I have indicated some of the shortcomings of this approach to the war: that it lacks documentation, that it is partisan, that ascription to personality can be no more than speculative, that certain outcomes may have been unavoidable despite the personalities involved, that the influence of the major figures was restricted by bureaucratic organizations, and that little direct consideration has been given to the resultant policies themselves. But despite its limitations, Halberstam's ambitious undertaking does provide some insights into the policymaking processes during the earlier phases of the Vietnam war. As journalistic and biographical history, *The Best and the Brightest* will probably rank as a major addition to the literature on this traumatic period in American foreign policy.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Capt. Wesley K. Clark graduated from the U.S. Military Academy in 1960 and spent the next 2 years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University. He has commanded tank companies at Fort Riley and Fort Knox and a mechanized infantry company with the First Infantry Division in Vietnam. Staff assignments include assistant G-3, First Infantry Division, and Operations and Plans Officer in the Office of the Special Assistant, Modern Volunteer Army. Captain Clark presently teaches economics and political philosophy in the Department of Social Sciences, U.S. Military Academy.

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In tone, in slant, in implication, Halberstam's work stands representative of the divisiveness and the torment of American society during the war. Indeed, Halberstam's very focus on personality is symptomatic of America's penchant for vilifying its leadership. When future scholars look back on the works of this era, they will find Mr.

Halberstam's intense partisanship as revealing of the times as his insights of the policymakers themselves. When we are able, in a generation, to evaluate the efficacy of American involvement in Southeast Asia, it is to be hoped that we will do so with more perspicacity and less passion than Mr. Halberstam has shown.

FOOTNOTES

1. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1972), p. 81-84. For example, Diem had maintained many contacts with anticolonial groups and had been asked to serve with Ho Chi Minh in a nationalist cabinet in 1946.

2. Henry Kissinger, *American Foreign Policy* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 29-33.

3. Thus, Harriman: "Harriman is really a shrewd old S.O.B.," Kennedy said later," (p. 271) and Stevenson: "What was it Jack Kennedy had said about Adlai Stevenson during the Cuban missile crisis when he had mocked Stevenson's softness—that you had to admire the way Stevenson was willing to fight for his convictions when everyone else in the room was against him," (p. 655) On Taylor, Halberstam quotes Harriman: "He is a very handsome man, and a very impressive one," said Averell Harriman in 1967, "and he is always wrong." (p. 478) Referring to Rusk, Halberstam noted: "In a pay phone booth in his own State Department someone in 1967 scratched the graffiti: 'Dean Rusk is a recorded announcement.'" (p. 634)

4. On Maxwell Taylor: "His were not the attitudes of a man about to be deterred from his path by a little peasant revolutionary Army. Not in the American century." (p. 481) On McNamara: "He was, after all not one to turn away from a challenge . . . To say that something could not or would not work or that it was beyond the reach of this most powerful nation in the world was to admit not just human frailty, but to fail in a very special and almost terrible way." (p. 514) On McGeorge Bundy: "He was so confident in himself, in his tradition and what he represented, that he had no concept about what failure might really mean, the full extent of it; it never really entered his calculations." (p. 527)

5. Those who worked for him and with him were surprised by the intensity of his feeling (as if he had blown his cool); since this sort of thing had been going on for some time, had not Washington realized that there would be killing? Why was he so surprised? It was and would continue to be a rare emotional response; for weeks after when someone questioned what they were doing with the bombing, the words would pour out, boys dying in their tents, we had to do something, we can't just sit by, we had to protect our boys. Even Johnson was fascinated by Bundy's emotional reaction . . . (p. 521)

6. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 525-526.

7. The North Vietnamese, if they judged by the French example, could expect the logic of escalation to crumble as Americans lost taste for a costly peripheral war, and hence, escalation of violence would suit their ends as well.

8. Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 78-79.

9. Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 249.

10. Writing of Harkin's replacement by Westmoreland in 1964, Halberstam says, ". . . When Harkins was finally brought home, the attitude in Washington was again simplistic, it was not the whole system, the bad war, which had produced such fraud, it was simply the wrong general. Thus, one replaced him with the best general around. Individuals could make a difference." (p. 405)

11. Halberstam's only specific reference to effects on the military, apparently derived from his earlier experience as a war correspondent, is his discussion of the frustrations faced by then Lt. Col. John Vann and four other officers in communicating their realistic field reports to Washington in 1962.

12. James Reston, "War Leaves Deep Mark on U.S.," *The New York Times*, 24 January 1973, p. 1.

13. Adam Yarmolinsky, writing in "The Impact of Vietnam on the Military Establishment," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 1975, p. 463.

Further, the military can no longer rely on an automatic assumption of priority for its stated requirements. Increasingly it will be competing with the needs of education and health care and housing and transportation, which when properly understood are seen as elements of national security. The military will have to take part in the process of deciding what it needs most, and what it can dispense with, in the service of a foreign policy more realistic and less grandiose than it has been.

14. See, for example, James L. Payne, *The American Threat: the Fear of War as an Instrument of National Policy* (Chicago: Markham, 1970).

15. For example, perhaps it was not arrogance or pride that influenced decisionmakers in the early sixties, but rather a clear-eyed view of the consequences of American disengagement. In his earlier book, *Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1965), Halberstam himself writes:

What about withdrawal? Few Americans who have served in Vietnam can stomach this idea. It means that those Vietnamese who committed themselves fully to the United States will suffer the most under a Communist government . . . It means a drab, lifeless and controlled society for a people who deserve better. Withdrawal also means that the United States prestige will be lowered throughout the world, and it means that the pressure of Communism on the rest of Southeast Asia will intensify. Lastly, withdrawal means that, throughout the world, the enemies of the West will be encouraged to try insurgencies like the one in Vietnam. Just as our commitment in Korea in 1950 has served to discourage Communist border crossings ever since, an anti-Communist victory in Vietnam would serve to discourage so-called wars of liberation. (p. 315)



When we reflect how difficult it is to move or deflect the great machine of society, how impossible to advance the notions of a whole people suddenly to ideal right, we see the wisdom of Solon's remark, that no more good must be attempted than the nation can bear.

Thomas Jefferson, "Writings," v. x, p. 255