

NOT SO GOOD, NOT SO BRIGHT

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The trouble with our presidents is that they don't take advice from brilliant young newsmen gifted with remarkable intelligence and exceptional hindsight. That is one of the general impressions to be gained on reading David Halberstam's recent top seller, *The Best and the Brightest*.

The title refers to that elitist, impetuous group of young intellectuals from the Kennedy-Johnson years, which managed to get us so deeply involved in Vietnam and made such a continuing mess of it. The author, whose sympathies are worn on his sleeve, after writing a profile on McGeorge Bundy, set out in early 1969 to discover how all these able, intelligent and rational men could have allowed such a tragedy to take place. So for more than 675 pages of annoyingly close print, the story unfolds, as the personalities involved in decisions about China, Indochina and Vietnam are subjected to microscopic dissection and analysis. Not only the Kennedys and their brain trust, but almost everyone from the time of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations onward who ever gave an opinion, influenced policy or made a decision about Far Eastern affairs is submitted to scrutiny and free psychoanalysis.

The result is an interesting and well-written book that gallops through the events of the last thirty years at breathless pace and deposits us in the lap of a Nixon administration still struggling to get free of the rice paddies. However, for all his wisdom, detailed research, special knowledge and hindsight, Halberstam is no more able to analyze and foretell correctly than the men who faced the same bucket of worms earlier and about whom he writes so knowingly. To the author, in the summer of 1972, "peace seems nowhere near" and in the book's concluding sentence, he still can find "no light at the end of the tunnel, only greater darkness."

The book represents some three years of investigative work, interviewing principals, digesting articles, biographies and memoirs (114 of these are listed in the bibliography), discussing with friends, reading newspapers, magazines, government documents and Pentagon Papers, a monumental effort. The impression made, however, is that a considerable part of the source material may have been selectively chosen and picked over to fit the Halberstam thesis. There is some uneasiness, too, about the author's penchant for Freudian analysis and interpretation. The neophyte psychologist at work who, after a brief session with patient and couch, is able to divine precisely his subject's innermost thoughts, emotions and motivations. The book could well be titled *Halberstam's Vietnam*.

We apparently didn't listen to the right people at the right times. The right people were those who advised against getting into a land war in Asia, who felt that Mao and Ho

were primarily nationalistic rather than communistic, who were against escalation, and who were, finally, for pulling out and admitting failure. The author gives top marks to such right people as Bowles, Harriman, Roger Hilsman, George Ball, Daniel Ellsberg and a few others. Apple-polishing Arthur Schlesinger barely conditions the course. The non-passers are almost too numerous to list, but McNamara, Bundy, Acheson, Dulles, Lyndon Johnson, Walt Rostow, Maxwell Taylor, Dean Rusk, Joseph Alsop and, as an afterthought, Nixon and Kissinger all rank at the bottom of the class. Even Jack and Bobby Kennedy flunk the first semester, although they are not subjected to the same psycho-political probing and teacher attention as are Johnson and Rusk, for example. In fact, Halberstam is almost certain that the Kennedys were improving, and, had the assassinations not occurred, either one or both would have changed policy, admitted it was hopeless, pulled us out of Vietnam by 1964 or 1965, and joined the A students.

Three of the very brightest who could have saved the day much earlier were those discredited. Far Eastern experts of the fifties—John Stewart Service, John Carter Vincent and John Patton Davies, all brilliant men who had been forced out of State Department service during the anti-Red China and communist-baiting days. In Halberstam's view, if there had been no McCarthy period, all of these men would still have been available in government to guide the Kennedy-Johnson team and "it all might have been different."

Well, it's nice to have everything explained and everyone pigeonholed so neatly, but it is certainly all hindsight. One might speculate in the same vein that if the Roosevelt administration had only accepted Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, Sr.'s evaluation and advice about Hitler's Germany, we might have stayed out of Europe in the 1940s, too. By now, Russia, England and the West European nations would all be happy National Socialist satellites and, with the gas chambers, atrocities and concentration camps long forgotten, we could be establishing diplomatic relations with a mellowing, efficiently run, germ free, Jew-free Republic of Greater Germany which always wanted us as a friend in the first place.

So, it seems the best could have been brighter, and the brightest could have been better. The highly touted Ivy League intellectuals failed to develop into major league professionals. Indeed, the New Frontier clubs—at home and on the road in places like Berlin, Cuba and Vietnam—performed more like Little Leaguers and not even up to acceptable bush league standards. Perhaps one lesson to be learned might be to keep any future Kennedy out of the manager's job.

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