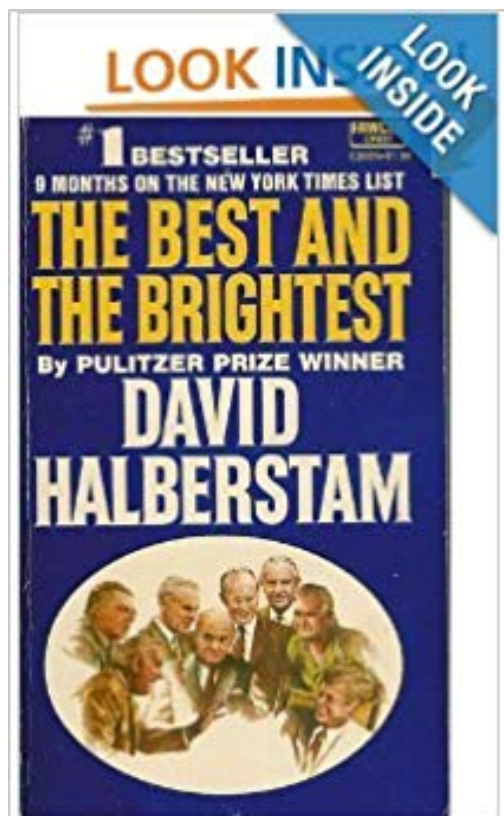


The Best and the Brightest *by* David Halberstam



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"A rich, entertaining, and profound reading experience."

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It is also the Iliad of the American empire and the Odyssey of this nation's search for its idealistic

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Reviews of the *The Best and the Brightest* *by* David Halberstam

Gelgen

The first (and only) time I read David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest" was shortly after its publication in 1975... that is, until last week, when I finished reading it again. I was just as impressed with it this time as I was forty years ago.

David Halberstam (1934-2007) was a journalist and author who reported from Vietnam for the New York Times in the early 1960s. He was one of a group of journalists (including Neil Sheehan and Peter Arnett, among others) who earned the ire of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations for his reporting of what he viewed as the truth about Vietnam - that America was getting itself involved in a conflict it couldn't win. Halberstam's reporting from Vietnam earned him a Pulitzer Prize in 1964.

As Halberstam explains in his preface to "The Best and the Brightest," he spent three years researching and writing the book. He intended his title to be ironic, not literal. The "Best and the Brightest" were leaders who were considered America's elite - John F. and Robert F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, McGeorge and William Bundy, George Kennan, George Ball, Clark Clifford, Walt Rostow, John McCone, and others. They were mostly graduates from Ivy League schools, many with Ph.D.'s; men of keen intellect and supposed prodigious management and leadership skills. Men who prided themselves on straight talk. And yet, these men slowly and steadily entangled the United States in a war on the Asian mainland that they knew, from both the warnings they received and from bitter experience, they had little chance of winning. And once they got America entangled in Vietnam, they mismanaged the war and deceived the American people about it, and left the nation torn asunder by divisions that exist to this day.

I don't necessarily agree with all Halberstam's judgments and conclusions in "The Best and the Brightest," but I do think he made a powerful argument that seems to be largely vindicated in the four decades since the end of the Vietnam War. I believe "The Best and the Brightest" is simply the best book ever written about America's involvement in Vietnam. If you only read one book about this subject, this is the book to read. Most highly recommended.

Cozius

This is an exceptionally well-written book about the way John F. Kennedy's idealistically selected cabinet dragged us down the muddy, dirty, twisted road and into the Vietnam conflagration. Nowhere, save in McMaster's more recent treatment (*Dereliction of Duty*, 1996) is the critical role of Robert S. McNamara in this debacle, so critically or accurately portrayed. Halberstam treats a number of critical subplots, too, such as the destruction of the "flexible response advocates" among the junior officer corps by Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense, the lamentable "Engine Charlie" Wilson, or the enmity between distinguished paratroop commanders Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin, or LBJ's complete consternation with Kennedy's Undersecretary of State for Southeast Asia, the decorated veteran of Merrill's Marauders and the OSS, Roger Hilsman (arguably the only man in the administration who knew anything at all about Southeast Asia in General and Vietnam in particular). An added value of Halberstam's treatment comes in the form of his detailed, insightful and assiduous character studies of all the principals, from nominal Republican McGeorge Bundy, the only non-PhD ever to serve as Harvard's Dean of the Undergraduate school, to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, intellectually despised by his mentor, Dean Acheson. This work is a must-read for anyone interested in both the Kennedy administration and in the question of how we got snookered into this impossible war in the first place.

Brightcaster

This is the seminal work relating to how we got ourselves immersed in Vietnam. I'm a Vietnam Veteran, and I have always thought our reasons for being there were misguided at best. In this exhaustive look at the gradual build-up to the maximum troop levels in 1969, it is apparent that our reasons were much less than misguided. It makes me angry that many good people died in this war, this senseless, stupid exercise of power gone awry. It is very sad not only that the Vietnam War occurred, it is very apparent that we fail to learn from the lessons of history (read: Iraq and Afghanistan).

"The Best and the Brightest" is an excellent work, deserving of the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Mr. Halberstam.

Tamesya

This is another outstanding book by the late David Halberstam, well written and researched. While I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, and learning so much about the Vietnam War years, I found myself saddened by the needless loss of 58,000 of my generation. Three of those from my high school, whose names I have visited several times on the Wall in Washington D.C.. Their faces were constantly in the back of my mind as I read about the flawed decisions and hubris that brought us into a war of choice. A terrible choice.

Nicanagy

A wonderful book. The most important thing to remember when reading is that the title "Best and Brightest..." is dripping with irony. The over whelming virtues of those who led us into this debacle were arrogance, ignorance and naivete. Despite their privileged, New England, Ivy League pedigrees and education, they were clueless. Yet they were perfectly willing to continue expanding and escalating the war, i.e., to pound harder on the square peg to make it fit into the round hole, in a vain attempt to save their face. Face which they arrogantly and cynically attempted to equate with saving America's face. And it mattered not a wit to them how many Vietnamese and "deplorable/irredeemable" American draftee and enlisted citizens needed to be put through the meat-grinder to make it happen.

invasion

A classic on Vietnam. David Halberstam's comprehensive analysis of the national tragedy teaches us the potential threat of elitist politics and rigid ideological constraints in our policy-making process. Although written in 1972, this amazing piece of history is not obsolete and serves as an excellent reminder for the upcoming administrations. His narrative can be difficult to follow in some parts.

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