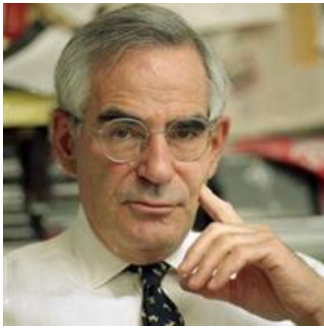


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An Eloquent Pen Stilled — David Halberstam

Wednesday, April 25, 2007



“It’s a wonderful privileged life, you know, being a book writer.” David Halberstam said that to Brian Lamb of C-SPAN in 1993. Halberstam was a reporter and author of incredible ability and considerable insight. Even when I disagreed with his assessments, I loved his style and insight.

David Halberstam died Monday in an automobile accident near San Francisco, California. He was 73. According to press reports, he was on his way to interview Y. A. Tittle, former quarterback for the New York Giants, for a book about the 1958 championship game between the Giants and the Baltimore Colts. As expected, Halberstam was working on a book on what some consider to be professional football’s greatest game.

Halberstam’s best books, based in his skill as a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and his style as a writer, had to do with America as a nation and its leaders as a reflection of the times.

His most famous book, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972), dealt with the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and the American belief that everything — the crisis in Vietnam included — could be solved with American know-how matched to superior intellect. In particular, John F. Kennedy had sought to build his administration on the intellect of his post-war generation, thus “the best and the brightest” of the nation.

This passage reveals the power of Halberstam’s writing. He deals with the aftermath of Lyndon Johnson’s attempt to work with “the Kennedy men” after President Kennedy’s assassination. At this point in the narrative, Vietnam is going badly — even as President Johnson’s advisors had promised him otherwise:

Johnson did not need other people’s problems and their murky forecasts, he had enough of those himself. What he needed was their support and their loyalty. He was, sadly, open-minded when things went well, and increasingly closed-minded when things went poorly, as they now were about to do. In the past, during all those long agonizing hours in 1964 and 1965 when they discussed the problems of Vietnam, they had all been reasonable men discussing reasonable solutions, and in their assumptions was the idea that Ho Chi Minh was reasonable too. But now it would turn out that Ho was not reasonable, not by American terms, anyway, and the war was not reasonable, and suddenly Lyndon Johnson was not very reasonable either.

That is a great paragraph. Halberstam distilled the historical moment and presented it to readers so that they could almost see and feel the agony of a distressed president. He seemed to capture the character of the leaders whose actions so shaped our times.

Later, Halberstam would write *War in a Time of Peace*, in which he would interpret the 1990s through the lenses of Presidents George H. W. Bush and William Jefferson Clinton. In this fascinating section of the book, Halberstam offers keen observations concerning President Clinton:

Some more traditional political analysts had begun to study Clinton’s moves and failings not in ideological terms as to whether he was of the left or the right of center, but in generational terms. As the first baby boomer president, he was

bright and talented but, they believed, spoiled. Like many boomers his expectations outweighed his sense of obligation. His talents — and his charm — were so considerable that they outweighed his faults. When he disappointed people, they always forgave him, and in time he came to expect their forgiveness. When things went wrong, he was unusually slow, even in private, to accept responsibility himself. The belief that what he represented generationally was critical to his political behavior was shared by some people who worked with him daily. Tony Lake and George Stephanopoulos would often talk about the difficulty they had in dealing with the president, deciding they bookended the boomer generation. Lake just a bit too old and Stephanopoulos a bit too young.

Once again, Halberstam delivers with brilliant prose. It is as if he had taken his readers into the Clinton White House — even into the minds of President Clinton and his senior staff. His insights into Clinton's personality and character come alive. This is a rare gift.

Halberstam's voice and pen will be missed. Nevertheless, he left one major new book yet to be released. His just-completed work on the Korean War, *The Coldest Winter*, is to be released in the fall. It is on my reading list for that season, but now with a new tinge of sadness.

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