The Best and the Brightest by David Halberstam

Reads As If It Were Written Yesterday.

A rich, entertaining, and profound reading experience. -- The New York Times

[The] most comprehensive saga of how America became involved in Vietnam. It is also the Iliad of the American empire and the Odyssey of this nations search for its idealistic soul. THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST is almost like watching an Alfred Hitchcock thriller. -- The Boston Globe

Deeply moving . . . We cannot help but feel the compelling power of this narrative . . . . Dramatic and tragic, a chain of events overwhelming in their force, a distant war embodying illusions and myths, terror and violence, confusions and courage, blindness, pride, and arrogance. -- Los Angeles Times

Most impressive, superb -- perceptive, literary, multidimensional. -- The New York Times Book Review

A story which every American should read. -- St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Nothing so brilliantly crystallized and clarified the epic true story of how the American people were led into the tragedy of Vietnam better than did this classic book by David Halberstam. Already famous for his journalistic overview in The Making of a Quagmire, Halberstam riveted the nation with his absorbing, literate, and very detailed account of how the arrogant, insular, technocratically well educated, and affluent sons and daughters of the Power Elite in this country led us into the unholy miasma of Vietnam. This is a classic story superbly told by a journalist with impeccable credentials.

Halberstam already had a wealth of personal experience as a correspondent in Vietnam before initiating the research for this book, and he draws a number of fascinating, intimate, and quite absorbing in-depth portraits of the major figures involved in this fools errand formerly referred
to as French Indochina. From the feckless and perhaps clueless Robert McNamara to McGeorge Bundy, brother William Bundy, former Oxford Scholar Dean Rusk, George Ball, William Westmoreland, Maxwell Taylor, and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, all these alumni of the best schools and best families (with the single exception of LBJ, an accidental president) pranced their pseudo-macho way toward the single most disastrous series of military decisions this side of Pearl Harbor.

Unlike those of us who actually saw the jungles of Vietnam up close and personal, these men were neither ignorant, nor provincial (at least not in the ordinary use of that term), nor poorly informed; rather, they both considered themselves and were considered by others to be the most outstanding, capable, and effective members of the contemporary Power Elite i.e. the best of the then contemporary ivy League graduates Kennedy could lure from the bastions of the academic, business, and corporate world into the magic and presumptuous world of Camelot. In essence, these guys were seen as the best and the brightest of their generation. Just how their elite educations, presumptuous world-views, and de-facto actual ignorance and lack of what we would now refer to as street-smarts led them to conclude it was in the nations interests to fight what others have called the wrong war in the wrong place with the wrong foes at the wrong time is an epic tale of arrogance, insular thinking, and mutually sustained delusions.

Through their efforts they embroiled us in an unwinnable war, a conflict that the rest of us paid so dearly for in blood, sweat and tears. They led a nation then so singularly blessed with affluence and peace into a bottomless cauldron of dissent, inter-generational strife, and almost pitched us off the precipice of social and political revolution. It is important to better understand what kind of men they were, and why they led us so carelessly into such sustained disaster. Why did they react to defeats by escalating, even when the evidence clearly indicated (as McNamara has recently admitted) doing so was futile? Who led whom down the primrose path in the meetings in which these decisions were repeatedly argued, hammered out and finally refined?

All these questions and many more are answered in this wonderfully documented and exhaustively detailed account of how it is that so few individuals engaged in a series of such disastrous policy decisions that led America into the quagmire of Vietnam. By the way, after carefully re-reading the book I am more convinced than ever that McNamara and Westmoreland (among others) should be indicted and tried as war criminals. Let them spend their dotage in federal prison. After all, there is no statute of limitations on conspiracy to commit murder, and I have dozens of friends gone too soon based on nothing more than the deliberately callous and reckless decisions made by these men as outlined in this book. I highly recommend it.

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