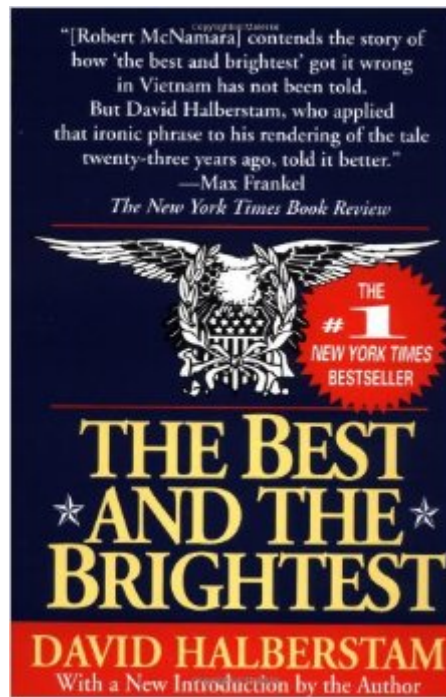


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The Best And The Brightest



Synopsis

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Customer Reviews

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 fool's 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.

Halberstam's book's most illuminating quote is attributed to one of Walt Rostow's (the chief architect of the US bombing of North Vietnam) Harvard colleagues. After his friend departed Cambridge, to take up his position in the Kennedy administration, this colleague walked into a roomful of students, and said, more or less, "you never sleep as well at night when you actually know people running the country." This book is all about the men (the best and the brightest) who mired this nation in Vietnam. It's also about other men, men like John Peyton Davies, perhaps the State Department's best Asian expert, purged from public service after the McCarthy juggernaut swept through the country. It's also about applying the wrong lessons of history to wrong problems: Kennedy and Johnson learned from Munich that nations shrink from "tyranny" at their own peril, and therefore decided to confront the "tyranny" of North Vietnam communism, which, according to Halberstam, was simply nationalism -- the extension of their colonial wars of the 1950s. Men like Davies would have realized this, and then warned against intervention; but men like Davies, ostensibly "soft" on communism, had already been run out of Washington (during the Vietnam War, Davies, the man Halberstam uses to personify the flight of those who really understood the intentions of North Vietnam, was making furniture in Peru). Men like McNamara, the Bundys, and Dean Rusk, despite their rationalism and considerable mental horsepower, didn't get this. Nor did they understand how to bring themselves (and the country) back once they'd stepped beyond the brink. For all its quality and insight, the book makes a little much of the "establishment" credentials of the war's architects.

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