

# 'The Brightest' Led Us to Disaster

"Let's Get this country moving again." — Walt Whitman  
Rostow.

By GEORGE VUKELICH

From the most influential fiefdoms in the kingdom they had been called to serve in the court of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

McGeorge Bundy from Harvard. Dean Rusk from the Rockefeller Foundation. Robert McNamara from Ford. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, soldier-scholar from the United States Army.

They were "the best and the brightest" of the age and they swept into Camelot with the sureness of champions who had been tested in the arenas of war and commerce, in the jousting pits of academia. They had been tested and not found wanting, no matter the challenge, no matter the combat.

They were a glittering host come to lead their less gifted countrymen. And where they led us was Vietnam.

It is worth noting that a wary old professional had them sized up early on and was not bedazzled. He was Vice President Lyndon Johnson's mentor and fellow Texan, Sam Rayburn, who listened quietly as an uncommonly awed LBJ raved on about the new players in the game.

"Well, Lyndon," said Mister Sam. "You may be right and they may be every bit as intelligent as you say. But I'd feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once."

Lyndon Johnson, as Halberstam tells it, never really got over his thing about the Kennedy men, feeling that in all that awesome brainpower there just had to be answers to his own dilemmas. He retained them for his own administration. He followed their advice scrupulously.

And when finally "their" war had become "his" war, most of them moved on to other sinecures, leaving Lyndon Baines Johnson alone with his unsolved dilemma — and babbling Walt Rostow — hunkered down like an old dying chief and his faithful shaman. In the end the brilliant Kennedy men would survive "their" war and Lyndon Johnson would not.

Lyndon Johnson, Halberstam writes, became a victim of the Vietnam War in the very same way millions of Americans, including Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and yes, Nixon became victims: After all was said and done, we were in a war to the death with communism.

And to be anti-Communist was to be on the side of the angels.

Thus, the road to Vietnam was paved to a very large extent by the witch hunting of Wisconsin Sen. Joe McCarthy who drove America's finest Asian experts out of the State Department, a blow from which the Far Eastern Service has not recovered to this day.

Ironically, the purging of State by the Republican McCarthy would pave the way for the Democratic Kennedy to weaken State even further by functioning as his own Secretary (having, Halberstam notes, "passed over Adlai Stevenson who wanted it badly and installed everybody's Number Two, Dean Rusk."). Kennedy's encroachment would in turn enable State to be weakened even further under Richard Nixon as the secretary's post evolved into a largely ceremonial office.

With State brought low, wounded and cauterized, one American administration after another staggered around the paddies and jungles of Asia like some great, blinded beast thrashing and flailing and finally chewing on its own entrails in frustration.

A healthy State Department could have told us of the realities of Asia—and saved us untold agonies. A healthy State would have clobbered the perceptions of a John Foster Dulles, who could say



BOOKS of  
the TIMES

By GEORGE VUKELICH

**The Best and Brightest,**

by David Halberstam.  
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after we had supported the French Colonial war for years with money and material that Dienbienphu "was a blessing in disguise. Now we enter Vietnam without the taint of colonialism." Our taint was more. It was arrogance.

We felt that we could succeed where the French had failed—in spite of the chilling, sobering report by Gen. Matthew Ridgeway in 1954 in which he calculated that U.S. intervention in Indochina would require, minimally, five divisions and up to 10 divisions if we wanted to clear out the enemy (as opposed to six divisions in Korea), plus 55 engineering battalions involving 500,000 to a million men. President Eisenhower ruled out intervention, Dienbienphu fell and America postponed her big war for a while and bid in small with Dulles' 200 "advisers".

John Kennedy, viewing the old Cold War in the new counterinsurgency context, promulgated by Max Taylor, would introduce Green Berets along with napalm, Saigon coups and get the ante up to 16,900 Americans in Vietnam—70 dead—and as Halberstam pointed out, "each dead American became one more rationale for more dead Americans." That rationale was to remain a constant throughout the nightmarish war.

At the end of his life Kennedy came to question the wisdom of an American combat commitment; he had grave doubts about the counterinsurgency program (whose Green Berets would be laid so lovingly at the Eternal Flame). Indeed, Kennedy came to question whether we should be in Vietnam at all. At the very moment he seemed to truly understand Vietnam, Kennedy was lost to us forever.

With his passing, the Kennedy team finally hooked up to that powerhouse, that mover, that can-do President, Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas.

History might have been different if Lyndon had accepted their tendered resignations without exception, cut our losses and simply built his Great Society. But he was markedly uncritical of the Kennedy men, accepting judgments he might have questioned from his own men.

Following their advice he would get us in up to our necks with over half a million men in country and Westmoreland clamoring for more. Years later, George Ball, who had fought with Johnson on the war and lost and yet retained considerable affection for him,

would say of the Kennedy luminaries and LBJ, "Johnson did not suffer from a poor education. He suffered from a belief that he had a poor education."

And finally, there was Robert Strange McNamara, Secretary of Defense for JFK and LBJ — Secretary of Defense for seven long, earthshaking years — who more nearly typified American involvement in Vietnam than any other man. He was technological man, tough, idealistic, his brain plugged into all the realities, all the probabilities, all the unit costs, McNamara was the best bookkeeping freak of all time.

Lyndon quoted the McNamara readouts as often as he quoted the popularity polls and he believed them and we believed them and somehow, we all sensed that we were really winning the war that really wasn't ending. The tragedy of McNamara is that he was smart enough to computerize the war and naive enough to believe all the lies that were fed into it.

By 1966 something happened to McNamara. It might have been his relationship to Bobby Kennedy. It might have been the Westmoreland — inspired body counts which he himself no longer believed. It might have been the defection of friends from the Johnson administration.

"Bless the doves," he would toast the departed Bill Moyers. "We need more of them."

In desperation and frustration over the war, in 1967 a brooding McNamara ordered a massive study of all the papers on Vietnam going back to the 1940s, a study which became known as the Pentagon Papers.

"You know," he said to a friend after seeing one of the first copies, "they could hang people for what's in here."

When McNamara finally threw in his cards and left the game, it was all over. There was no victory, there was defeat.

Halberstam in an interview with the Milwaukee Journal would observe that the Kennedy men would never publicly admit that they had made a mistake in Vietnam and their silence enabled Richard Nixon to prolong the war there for an additional four more years.

Sociologist David Riesman of Harvard was never too impressed with the credentials of the Kennedy lieutenants.

"They thought they knew the world and their country. It turns out they knew neither the world nor their country. They were Atlantic provincials."

And thus, the book ends, some four long years ago on the eve of Richard Nixon's first term as President. He would keep us in Vietnam still searching for a victory and finally settling for "peace with honor." Nixon and the men around him could hardly be called Atlantic provincials, for their sole tie to Harvard is Dr. Henry Kissinger who made perhaps the most perceptive statement to come out of the war when he said, "It may be that Vietnam will destroy all who touch it."

David Halberstam's Vietnam dispatches for the New York Times in 1962 and 1963 earned him the Pulitzer Prize and the wrath of President Kennedy who wanted him to either get in line with the administration or get out of Asia. Later, Halberstam earned the opprobrium of President Johnson who would speak bitterly about "that traitor, Halberstam."

"The Best and the Brightest" is the finest book to come out of the Vietnam War because David Halberstam is one of the finest reporters who covered that war — and survived.

Bernard B. Fall could have written a book of this importance, perhaps even a greater one because he covered the war better than anybody — but Fall did not survive.

Thank God one of them did.