

# War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals

*David Halberstam*

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## **War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals** David Halberstam

In this successor to his #1 nat'l bestseller "The Best & the Brightest," Halberstam describes in fascinating human detail how the shadow of the Cold War still hangs over American foreign policy & how domestic politics have determined our role as a world power. More than 25 years ago he told the story of the men who conceived & executed the Vietnam War. Now the Pulitzer Prize-winning author has written another chronicle of Washington politics, this time exploring the complex dynamics of foreign policy in post-Cold War America. Halberstam evokes the internecine conflicts, the untrammelled egos & the struggles for dominance among the key figures in the White House, the State Department & the military. He shows how the decisions of men who served in the Vietnam War--such as Gen. Colin Powell & presidential advisers Richard Holbrooke & Anthony Lake--& those who didn't have shaped American politics & policy makers (perhaps most notably, President Clinton's placing, for the 1st time in 50 years, domestic issues over foreign policy). With his ability to find the real story behind the headlines, he shows how current events in the Balkans, Somalia & Haiti reflect American politics & foreign policy. He discusses the repercussions in Washington on policy makers from two different administrations; the wariness of the American military to become caught again in an inconclusive ground war; the frustrations of civilian advisers, most of whom have never served in the military; & the effects these conflicting forces have on the American commander in Kosovo, Gen. Wes Clark. Sweeping & deep, "War in a Time of Peace" provides portraits of Clinton, Bush, Reagan, Kissinger, James Baker, Dick Cheney, Madeleine Albright & others, to reveal modern political America.

## **War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals Details**

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# From Reader Review War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals for online ebook

## Krlb says

Thorough explanation of the U.S. involvement in Yugoslavia, Haiti, Somalia, and Rwanda during the Bush and Clinton presidencies

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## Jim says

I think I have tried reading this book on 5 separate occasions, and, for whatever reason, it loses my interest pretty quickly.

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## David W Musal says

### Inside view of how we came to be in (former) Yugoslavia

It was an interesting look into the struggle to formulate a foreign policy to deal with the breakup of Yugoslavia. It illustrates the inevitable link between domestic and international policy, regardless of who is in office.

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## Szplug says

Halberstam's books are sweeping historical tomes that are written in a conversational style, backed up by his perspicacious probing of the personalities that are involved in (usually) tumultuous events. In *War in a Time of Peace* his scope is the various theatres of US military involvement in the otherwise market economy obsessed nineties—beginning with the Grand Coalition of the First Gulf War and proceeding to an in-depth look at the sometimes scattershot foreign policy towards the Balkan conflict that played out under Clinton's watch.

A major theme of the book is the pervasive wariness towards US intervention abroad after the fiasco of Vietnam, a civil and military personnel-wide case of *once bitten, twice shy*. The end result of this painfully instilled caution was the implementation of the *Powell Doctrine*, which explicitly laid out the framework necessary before any US soldiers were to be committed to a foreign conflict. Halberstam works primarily through portraits of key players in the military and governmental ranks; he shows a marked preference for George H. W. Bush over Bill Clinton—the latter coming across as a foul-mouthed, petulant dilettante—and relies upon the memories of such as James Baker, Anthony Lake, Richard Holbrooke and General Wesley Clark in particular in his working through of the various nineties scenarios that occupied the United States' attention. Such broad character assessments go in hand with Halberstam's detailing of the rapid political, technological, and ideological changes that were sweeping across the international landscape after the final collapse of the Soviet Union and the outreach of free market globalism under its dual change agents the World Bank and the IMF. A withering critique of the Clinton administration's penchant for subsuming

foreign policy to domestic leaves the reader with little doubt that Halberstam believed a second Bush term would have put the United States in a much stronger position to deal with the foreign policy developments that were left to a grudging Clinton to handle.

Is it possible that the big league personalities that Halberstam relied upon may have had axes to grind with their political and/or ideological opponents? It would of course seem an obvious potentiality—indeed, General Clark, in particular, comes across as a man with the patience of Job, enduring a countless barrage of petty slights and insults by a jealous and incompetent Pentagon and still managing to achieve the relatively modest goals set by the United States in the mountainous miasma of a broken Yugoslavia, only to be unceremoniously dumped whilst still basking in the glow of success—but Halberstam gives short shrift to such sidelong examination. Instead, we are given an insightful, encompassing, and skillfully written history of the United States political and military wings in the nineties—and whatever Halberstam's failings in his perceived partiality, there have been few other works that cover this period in such depth, let alone in such a smoothly flowing package.

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## **Adam says**

I have some reservations giving this book four stars due to frustration with what I was expecting. I feel that the book really doesn't provide the history of "Bush, Clinton and the Generals" as presented in the title. It really is more about Bush, Clinton, the Generals, the Mindnumbing Reticence to Get Involved in the Balkans, and Some Other Things That Happened in the 90s.

As someone who is interested in Africa, the short attention given to Rwanda is frustrating. Perhaps Halberstam just didn't have access to sources tied around the decision to not get involved in Central Africa like he did with the Balkans. Elsewhere, Kenya makes an appearance three times in the book, once as an odd reference point to the former Yugoslavia. However, none of those appearances relates to the bombing of the US Embassy in Kenya in 1998. This seemed strange to me given that more US citizens died in the attack on the embassy in Kenya than during the two campaigns in the Balkans. Also, the US did fire some missiles into Sudan and Afghanistan in response, so I imagine at some point "Clinton and the Generals" had a conversation or two. This was a major event for the 90s, yet it's not even mentioned and demonstrates that this is a very incomplete history.

When Halberstam wasn't writing directly about US policy towards the Balkans, he was writing about how other events or personalities related to US policy in the Balkans and that's what this book really is: a history of the US policy towards the Balkans in the 90s and why it was that way. Halberstam does a very good job of interweaving the domestic political factors and other foreign influences that affected US policy towards the Balkans, or the lack thereof. If the book is read in that manner, then it is generally very well written.

Sure, I found parts of it to be a bit repetitive, but not overly so. I also sense that Halberstam didn't really feel comfortable writing about women. The way he writes about Madeline Albright doesn't give her credit for being intelligent and slowly working her way up through the foreign policy establishment. Nope, he makes it sound like she married well, got a divorce, and then had some time to do that whole Secretary of State gig. However, these flaws didn't really slow me down from picking up the book to see where it would lead next. They may prevent me from giving it 5 stars, but they didn't prevent me from enjoying the vast majority of the book.

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## Tom Gase says

One of my favorite authors of all time is David Halberstam, so it may be a little bias for me to give this a four star review. It's probably a little closer to a 3.5 or 3.

When I found this book used in San Francisco, I picked it up immediately. I talked with a lady and her husband and she asked if I had read it. She said the book was great and she mentioned a few other books of Halberstam's that were also good such as *The Best and the Brightest* and *The Powers that Be*. I told her that the only political book I've read by Halberstam was *The Coldest Winter*, a 600-page epic about the war nobody likes to talk about--The Korean War. I believe there are two kinds of Halberstam fans; the ones that read his political books and the ones that read his sports' books. My first grown up sports book I ever read was "*The Summer of 49*" which is still one of my fav books I've ever read. From there I read other sports' books such as "*Teammates*", "*Fall of 1964*", "*Playing for Keeps*" and "*Education of a Coach*" that Halberstam wrote. Now, I'm trying to read his political books as well. It's hard to figure out what Halberstam is known more for, his political books or his sports' books. *Summer of 49* is often called the best sports book ever written, while *The Best and the Brightest* is often called the tops in that genre.

*War in a Time of Peace* is somewhere in the middle. It focuses on the late 80's and early 90's, and discusses the former Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton. The book did a great job educating me on controversial topics such as Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Haiti and Somalia without being bias. It also talks about the Monica Lewinsky affair (although briefly). Not only does it talk about the Presidents, but also key important people such as Colin Powell, Tony Lake, Dick Holbrooke, General Wes Clark, Al Gore, John Shalikashvili, Slobodan Milosevic and Madeleine Albright.

The book has some parts that drag, and you are left wondering when the topic will end, but it is very informative. Nobody, and I mean nobody, did his research better than Halberstam. Sometimes I believe he did too much, if that's possible. There are so many characters in this book that it's a must that you read only a couple chapters at a time and let everything sink in. Keeping a list of all the people is also suggested by me.

I've been told this is a sequel to "*The Best and the Brightest*", but since I haven't read that book yet, I can't comment on that. All I can say is that this is a good read, but not his best.

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## Ted says

When I discovered this book, I decided I had to read it - a book on American foreign policy in the 1990s - the period that I lived through but in terms of news primarily remember elections and the impeachment debacle. The history classes in high school and college never got this far, fizzling to a close around Reagan and the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification if they got that far. A whole lot has happened since.

Halberstam's account does a good job filling in the blanks, and gave me a better understanding of the Clinton presidency. Clinton was one of my heroes at the time and now I despise his campaign tactics as he tries to get his wife elected, a worrisome attempt at a restoration and enhancing his legacy, which my man Barack Obama threatens to obliterate. Seriously, Obama has the potential to be a Democratic Reagan in terms of inspiring the country and causing a fundamental shift in the body politic. A Hillary Clinton administration

promises governing from the polls, an inability to make principled, unpopular decisions, partisan war. We can do better and we had better do better if we intend to solve this world's and this country's problems. Back to the book - well, Clinton doesn't come off great here. George H.W. Bush was a great foreign policy president who didn't have a feel for the American people. Clinton had a perfect feel for the American people and didn't care enough about foreign policy, only truly being successful internationally in the second term. Perhaps Halberstam thought Bush junior's team could have done a good job - this was published in 2001, republished the next year with an epilogue which is the most interesting part of the book. His predictions - in the last chapter of terrorism being our problem, in the epilogue of Bush's committed unilateralism and the evident dominance by the Cheney hardliners in W.'s foreign policy - are pretty spot-on. The summation of Clinton foreign policy and analysis of the people involved, from Christopher and Albright to various diplomats and Balkan leaders and Wesley Clark, is all very informative and interesting. I really don't like Halberstam's writing style, however. He could use an editor - he often says the same thing 3 or 4 times, phrased slightly differently. He jumps around in time a bit too much for my liking too - dealing with an election one chapter, then going back to events in Yugoslavia a year previous. Other international affairs stuff I've recently read like George Packer's *The Assassin's Gate*, on Iraq, and Lawrence Wright's *The Looming Tower*, on al Qaeda, have been better organized, reading like novels. The digressions in Halberstam bring to mind how Homer would go off and talk about someone's parents in the *Iliad*. That annoyed me more in the *Iliad*, actually. The book just could have been shorter and crisper. But a worthwhile read for understanding the Clinton years, particularly if you're in your midtwenties like me, or just because the media covered the intricacies of the Lewinsky affair in far greater detail than those of the war in Kosovo.

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### **Robert Morris says**

David Halberstam may have mistimed his return to US foreign policy, but we benefit. Halberstam, the author of *The Best and the Brightest*, one of the most famous appraisals of the Vietnam disaster, chose to write this in-depth analysis of the politics of the period following the cold war up to September 11. The politics of the Clinton era, the first Gulf War, Somalia, and above all, the disintegration of Yugoslavia certainly make for interesting reading. His reasoned analysis of the period following might have been more useful. Sadly he is no longer with us.

This book, however, is tremendously valuable. His account of the often dysfunctional way our military and presidential administrations dealt with foreign policy challenges is extraordinary. The book tells compelling stories about almost every major issue between the Cold War and 2000 or so. The description of the Clinton administration's general lack of interest in foreign policy is pretty damning. His description of impressive but little known figures like Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Shalikashvili is enlightening. The way that people like Shalikashvili and general Wesley Clark were able to make foreign policy in the absence of civilian oversight is quite disturbing. A fascinating book. The lack of Halberstam's analysis of the current mess is a great loss.

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### **Aaron Million says**

Another solid effort by Halberstam. He does a good job of fleshing out the various competing factions within the Bush and Clinton administrations, primarily concerning whether (and how) to utilize the military to put an end to Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo. Both administrations

featured doves and hawks. Added to that, the Joint Chiefs of Staff usually seemed to be at odds with the White House, and even at odds with some of its own field commanders.

Halberstam discusses how Bush was slow to grasp the seriousness of the situation, and never really did act on it prior to leaving office. He then details how Clinton, at the beginning of his term, had virtually no interest whatsoever in foreign policy, and was excessively concerned with his legacy and how to win the next campaign. Almost nobody comes out looking like roses here: neither President, none of their highly-qualified secretaries or other administrators, the various JCS chairmen, the high command of the Army, the media, and of course Milosevic. The shadow of Vietnam hangs over the decision-making process like a dark cloud, and helps to paralyze potential action plans.

The only thing that I think Halberstam overlooks here, is when he talks about Clinton not being interested in foreign policy and not having many accomplishments in that area. Clinton's critical role in forging peace in Northern Ireland was a great show of leadership, yet it is not even mentioned in passing in the book.

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### **Scottnshana says**

I entered the military just before the Gulf War, so--25 years later--I appreciated this in-depth evaluation of what was happening in the 1990s at the top levels of the U.S. national security apparatus. I bought this book at Borders in San Diego, California, back in 2005, and I'm kind of glad it has awaited me in a box through three moves and tours at the UN and NATO. It has clarified a lot of detail of the Bush 41 and Clinton years for me--to include the deployment I did to support the air war over Serbia. One of the first phenomena Halberstam tackles is the 1992 Clinton victory--the take-down of a super-capable national security administration in favor of 'It's the economy, Stupid.' He likens it to the British election in 1945--where 'they had believed that Churchill's primary passion was defense and foreign policy, not domestic affairs, and they wanted someone who they thought would pay more attention to their postwar needs.' Only a journalist like Halberstam, who went into the elephant grass of Vietnam to cover that war, and spilled a lot of ink on the postwar evolution to an American superpower, could make this end-of-Cold-War comparison in such an apt manner, I think. Here Vietnam is constantly lurking behind the scenes as he discusses controversial figures like Merrill McPeak and the first 'Boomer POTUS' flirting with an ROTC slot to avoid joining men like Colin Powell and Halberstam in the rice paddies. He delves into the class of American angry a55holes that popped up like mushrooms during the Clinton administration (he mentions Rush Limbaugh by name on p.210) to look for enemies amongst our own populace when the Soviet monolith disappeared. On the next page, to be fair, Halberstam points out that Clinton's presidency, 'already so attuned to every drop or rise in the national political temperature or the polls, to pay too much attention to the daily responses to presidential actions was catastrophic.' The Clintons do not get off light in this account of the Cold War's aftermath; the Lewinsky affair is of course described in objective but painful detail and linked to the looming humanitarian disaster in southeastern Europe, but so is the aftermath of Mogadishu, where the remaining superpower seemed to believe that Rwanda was a fire that would burn itself out as people hacked each other to death with machetes and the UN mission in the middle of it pleaded for its assistance. Halberstam tees up 9/11 nicely in this edition--everyone knows that Rumsfeld was obsessed with going to Iraq to finish the job, but Halberstam also points out Rummy's obsession with the 'high-tech Maginot Line' known as Star Wars when al Qaeda was infiltrating U.S. flight schools. He also speaks of the attitudes (I write this 11 years after the author's untimely death in a car accident) that have led us to the current situation. 'Our instinct,' he writes, 'born of geography, is to be apart.' It is a mindset that coped fairly well when the republic was surrounded by friendly neighbors and 2 wide oceans. Unfortunately, after the arrival of ICBMs and the internet, America can't count on its geography for security; and I think that 'War in a Time of Peace' makes the case that not

only is isolationism a non-option, but abdicating our leadership position amongst pretty-dependable allies is a disastrous idea.

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### **Kenneth Barber says**

This is an excellent book about foreign policy issues that faced the United States after the fall of the soviet empire. No longer were issues black and white but now were often humanitarian issues or peace keeping. In these situations the countries involved often were not sympathetic situations. Bosnia, Kosovo , Somalia and Haiti were all situations where neither side were very likable

The book details the characters involved in the issues from both sides. Also halberstam follows the internal struggles within our society that complicated our responses to each situation.

The book relates how complicated foreign policy issues are in the world today.

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### **K. Kumar says**

War in a Time of Peace is a reference to the idea that post-Cold War, America has been increasingly fighting or engaging in small, proxy wars that do not seem to present any real national security threats to the country. The soldiers who fight and sacrifice represent a small part of the country and the wars are fought with increased sophistication to prevent American casualties and make it seem like it is not really a war, but rather akin to a video game. Policy makers are hesitant to fight these types of wars because the outcomes are uncontrollable and they want to avoid casualties. In a sense, foreign policy is more of a distraction and for the politicians it is completely about posturing.

This book covers the end of the Bush administration (first) and then the Clinton presidency, and focuses on foreign policy generally with special attention given to the Bosnian war. This is a sobering read. Foreign policy experts in our government appear to have no idea what they are doing, or rather every foreign policy decision does not start from what is right or what is good for America, but what is politically expedient. Who gets the credit and who avoids the blame. This book covers it all, from the disaster in Somalia and the near disaster in Haiti, to the apathy in Rwanda, to the slow roll in Bosnia. President Clinton comes off as largely disengaged, more concerned about other things apparently.

My big takeaway from this book is what is absent. Published in 2001, the book completely omits reference to Osama Bin Laden or Al Qaeda. There is no reference to Islamic terrorism. Thus, the reader is left to wonder: with all the money and effort going to shape a politically expedient, politically correct, morally acceptable foreign policy, did the Clinton administration ignore the greatest threat facing America? They were all focused on other things. One has to be careful to avoid hindsight bias, but it is hard not to contemplate the great failure of U.S. foreign policy post-Cold War. And it is/was a political failure.

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### **Judy says**

In this detailed look at American foreign policy during the George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations, David Halberstam focuses his attention on three primary areas of foreign policy crises for



the United States--ethnic warfare in the Balkans, the continuing tensions in the Middle East, and bloody confrontations in Africa. And in developing his narrative, Halberstam creates detailed word portraits of the primary players in both the political and military spheres including Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, Henry Kissinger, Dick Cheney, James Baker, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Wesley Clark and a host of others. Halberstam makes it clear that decision making at the upper levels of the government is clearly influenced by the personalities and relative power relationships that exist among the chief decision makers. A fascinating study.

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### **Joseph Stieb says**

In some ways very useful and interesting, in others frustrating and unoriginal. Halberstam is obviously a tremendous writer, and his flair and imagination come across strongly in this book. He covers the history of US foreign intervention, especially the debate over humanitarian intervention in Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, and Haiti. Halberstam does a great job explaining conflicts between and within civilian authorities and the military. In general, it was the military that was most hesitant to get involved in these countries, although Clinton and most of his advisors didn't want to either. The back and forth between civilians and the military (and within each "branch") makes this book compelling reading for any scholars of recent US foreign policy. Unfortunately, Halberstam is quite unclear on his sources (interviews, mostly), which means that you have to be careful using him for more scholarly purposes. The book also has fascinating mini-bios of key FP figures in the 1990's; I especially enjoyed those of Wes Clark, Warren Christopher, and Madeline Albright.

I left the book with an equivocal feeling about humanitarian intervention. On one hand, it seemed that the US could have done something (bomb Serbian artillery positions around Sarajevo, open the arms blockade on the former Yugoslavia) to alleviate human misery there even if they couldn't solve the political crisis. When the US started to really push on the gears of this thing (largely because it grew into a political liability), they were painstakingly able to create and maintain peace in Bosnia and Kosovo. On the other hand, I totally understand the hesitance of the military to get involved in these murky, deep-rooted conflicts, their fear of a renewed guerrilla war, and their suspicion that the civilians and the country weren't paying attention and didn't care. In sum, this book suggests to me that the US can exercise power for good in some situations in the world, but that we will always have a conflict between our universalist and humanitarian tendencies against our reasonable unwillingness to sacrifice lives for non-vital interests. The same tension, I think, shapes our Syria policy today.

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### **Tim Pendry says**

David Halberstam produces here a useful historical document, as an experienced journalist who undertook many primary source interviews to get some sense of the conflicts between the military and the political leadership over policy and power that took place under Bush I and Clinton (I).

The narrative is dominated by the crisis in Yugoslavia. This helped to define the new liberal internationalism that emerged in subsequent years (although Halberstam was not to know this). The book might be seen an ur-source for evaluating the seeds of the mess we are now in.

Completed just before 9/11, the book is remarkable for not mentioning the Middle East, bar one passing

reference to the Peace Process, and relations with Russia are only considered indirectly. Fortunately, the collapse of the Soviet Union was not a matter for the generals as imminent war.

This all gives a slightly skewed picture but only if we do not understand what Halberstam is doing here. He is not writing a history of foreign policy or of national defence but only one about a dialectic - that between military realism and political short-termism and ideology.

Evaluating the lessons of this book might result in a very long and detailed essay so I will only pull out some themes and let the reader explore them himself based on the facts that Halberstam lays out in his book. You can judge whether his (and my) interpretations are correct on those facts.

I rather trust Halberstam within the limited territory he is exploring. He usefully understands the historic pull of past wars on American politics and on military thinking and he is an 'insider' insofar as an intellectual journalist can be one in a relatively free society.

The first theme is the importance of a President who actually understands the world he is dealing with. George H. Bush comes across as sophisticated, surrounded by people of judgement and experience. Clinton horrifies somewhat as clever and shallow, vacillating, almost 'feminine'.

Nor is Clinton's team particularly impressive. I do not think that Halberstam is showing any partisan bias (unusually for American political writing). They really are unable to cohere around clear macro-analyses and decisive effective planning with some notion of consequences.

I refuse to draw easy conclusions about the competence of Hillary Clinton who may soon be leader of the largest military empire the world has ever seen. She now has significant experience and she is not her husband but the historic conduct of Democrat foreign policy might reasonably worry us.

The second theme is the conservatism of the military. One leading figure is quoted as saying that the Democrats want a small military and to use it everywhere and the Republicans a large army and never use it all. This is borne out by the book (though things change with Bush II's neo-cons).

Surprisingly, one comes to the conclusion that, all things being equal, the US military and the Republicans to whom they tend are America's Peace Party and the Democrats, in opposition to traditional European 'Leftism', are the War Party.

Self-evidently, the American military were still in super-war mode, against the threat of a major world war, and adjusted only slowly to the collapse of the Soviet military threat. They also had no illusions about the massive costs of ground war operations (and remain cautious today).

The Gulf War under Bush certainly restored the American military's sense of what was possible against a second rank traditional state power but it told the military nothing about the costs of mountainous guerrilla war or managing failed states

Former Yugoslavia and Somalia taught them what the later Iraq War was to teach them. Destroying a formal state power is one thing and, if you are prepared to accept the body count, possible but reconstruction and policing are another thing. George C. Marshall was very much an army man.

To win is not to hold or settle. Body bags where the public cannot see their essential interest in the game (after all, America needed Pearl Harbour to undertake its mission against the rise of national socialism)

implied a repetition of Vietnam's undermining of trust in the system.

Could liberal internationalism have gone ape around the world if 9/11 had not happened? We doubt it. And the strike against Iraq (unconnected to 9/11) mirrors the decision to go for Germany first instead of Japan after 1941 because of decisions already made elsewhere.

What strikes one here is that, until George W. Bush decided to invade a country on spurious grounds, the military and political establishment were both consistently nervous of taking any armed actions but for different reasons. How that changed is the story of the last third of the book.

For the military it was the justifiable fear of the costs of failure and concern at the inability of the civilians to come up with any plan for consequences (which was to prove fatal in Iraq). For civilians it was fear of domestic electoral consequences and simple ignorance of strategy.

What triggered interventionist strategies was ideological sentiment - mostly Democrat excitability about humanitarian issues in countries they scarcely understood. They certainly had no serious plan about what to do if the aggressor was beaten. It was "Something must be done!"

The blundering around in Clinton's first term is embarrassing - whether it be Somalia, Haiti or Bosnia. The sensible Vance-Owen proposals were sidelined by political half wits only to be returned to in essence and in a weaker version after much misery later.

Allies play scarcely any role in the deliberations except as dead weights on action (early Clinton) or agents provocateurs (later Clinton). Speaking as a Brit, the US has often been manipulable by foreign powers from the British Empire through to Israel. This period was no exception.

By the second term we are moving into legacy time, that point where a narcissistic President starts to think about how he will be seen by history and realises that he is going to be seen as a middle ranker unless he solves some big question.

The Middle East Peace Process was the obvious solution but that all falls apart on the stunning obduracy of Yasser Arafat so the crisis in Yugoslavia emerges as the constant sore that is high risk but also high reward if something can be done - yet it is not the President who really drives this.

Where Halberstam is particularly good is on the personal dynamics that are the essence of the American State at the highest level - who is up, who is down, who is respected and who is not, what personal histories dictated what ideological presupposition.

We see the emergence or rather convergence of activist liberal internationalists genuinely concerned about the condition of the peoples of former Yugoslavia but also activists for the use of US power to order the world (a theme to be taken up by the neo-cons with more aggression later).

There are State Department officials and policy wonks but these are buttressed by two new forces - Wesley Clark as SACEUR and the arrival in London of the 'hawk' Tony Blair who seems to have had a ready-made model of global military intervention to hand.

The story of Wes Clark is most instructive for two reasons. He was clearly hated by the US military establishment but his role as SACEUR allowed him to push the envelope in using military resources to pursue a war that they saw no reason for. The second reason was air power.

The eternal conflict within the US military over the value and role of air power was not quite resolved by the Gulf War but it was arguable now that a state could be brought low simply with aggressive targeting by a new stock of precision-guided weaponry.

The radicals wanted to show that air power alone was sufficient to bring a tyrant to heel. Wes Clark (an army man) drove this tactic as far as he could against Milosevic despite European doubts and divisions in NATO and Pentagon attempts to deny him any ground support resources.

In fact, it worked but not in the simple way that liberal intellectuals have presented to the world since. It worked because the US was actually backing gangsters as bad as Milosevic in the KLA (just as it had earlier backed the quasi-fascists of Tudjman's Croatia) and the Serb people revolted.

As Halberstam points out, the Serb internal revolt was enabled because Yugoslavia precisely was not the total dictatorship of myth - Former Yugoslavia was a hybrid of single party secret police control and relative intellectual and civil society freedom. Milosevic pushed the people too far.

At the same time, Serbia lost its negotiating position because Russia, economically-dependent on the West under the corrupt Yeltsin, simply and overtly withdrew support from its old ally. This was from weakness and another seed of the future - Putin would reverse this within a few years.

Air power 'worked' but it could not be said to have done so without cost. The US was never tested with a ground invasion (the US military clearly did everything it could not to allow SACEUR that option) and the humanitarian mission was actually as much in support of gangsters as victims.

What Halberstam does not write about is the medium term and long term consequences of the flaccidity of a Clinton looking for a legacy, whose wife clearly has inherited that legacy not as short term fix but as an ideology - which may makes her as dangerous as her rival, more so perhaps.

The discovery of air power under conditions where the old superpower Russia could be treated with contempt and China was still rising but without skin in the game - and monomaniacs like Tony Blair could offer unstinting support - created a new mentality of 'possibility'.

It was not the humanitarian Democrats who took things to the next stage (although Al Gore is likely to have been a strong interventionist) but Bush II with a determined model of using humanitarian rhetoric to take out states that challenged US authority to set the global agenda.

Well, we know how that turned out - but equally interesting is the trajectory of non-US liberal internationalists into an ideology that abandoned over a century of Leftist aversion to the use of war and the effect of the Yugoslav warlets on a revived and aggressive NATO.

The first created Left cliques for criminal operations against Iraq but also for an acceptance that military forces could legitimately be used to enforce Western liberal standards. Blair led the US by the nose after the apparently successful Sierra Leone campaign and then was led by the nose.

The second used the humanitarian model as cover for the expansion of liberal values by what had been hitherto an essentially defensive alliance, turning it into a force for potential aggression against anything that might prove a threat in the future - Russia being the most obvious.

The realist 'sphere of influence' understanding that reached its high point at Yalta gave priority to global

peace over human rights. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed liberals to switch the emphasis from global peace and the nation state to human rights (inherent in the Atlantic Charter).

Despite the Cold War, the superpowers maintained a sort of balance in which spheres of influence and ideas were contested short of direct military conflict until one of them collapsed. At that point, the beaten power could have been respected or treated as defeated - the West chose the latter.

Such triumphalism might have worked if the world carried on along the same trajectory but Russia revived with reason to be distrustful and not grateful, China watched how the US behaved and learned lessons and Political Islam and failed states started to grind down the American Empire.

Rights sound noble especially to intellectual leader writers in the West, easily seduced by ideas, but it meant that NATO started to move into every political vacuum presented to it, backed up by trade promises that could not be safely fulfilled, especially in relation to free movement of labour.

It then participated in the slow degradation of the European West's borderlands by interventions that pushed it right up to the borders of Russia itself and destabilised regimes such as Libya's that were brutal but which also acted as defensive lines against migration, terror and organised crime.

None of this could be known by the actors in Halberstam's book, completed in 2001 as contemporary history, but the crisis of our time cannot just be put down to the exploitation of new powers by George W. Bush and the Cheney Gang - that is all too easy.

It comes ultimately down to the narcissism and foreign policy ignorance of his predecessor whose weakness included an inability to engage with his foreign policy staffs and listen with care and respect to his military - and to allow men like Blair and Clark to drive the agenda.

The competent one, George H. Bush, turned out to be the one who could not win an election because, understandably, the American people are and should be most concerned with domestic prosperity and the theatre that is American politics. Democracy is problematic for empire.

We are coming up to another decisive election in a few months and there is an unusual intensity in this one regarding foreign policy. The foreign policy establishment that has locked itself into power since Kosovo is clearly terrified of a Trump who asks too many difficult questions.

The question is whether Hillary is better than her husband - that is a question for Americans to answer but insofar as her time at State was a continuation of the last days of her husband's rule under a more moderate, apparently competent and sensible Democrat President, doubts are normal.

As for Halberstam's book, it remains worth reading even if he could have done with a bit of sub-editing at times in the first third where he repeats himself a bit. His analyses are always plausible. His insight into the micro-politics of American statecraft genuinely enlightening.

It is worth reading the very short post-9/11 introduction after rather than before the rest of the book. Its tone is at variance with the main text and it reminds us that Americans really were shocked into counter-aggression by the Islamist aggression - and confused by what had happened.

But, finally, what really strikes me about his text is that it is part of a non-reflexive culture that finds it very difficult to ask more fundamental questions about its own imperial conduct - what does the nation actually

want and do its people have much informed say in that decision?

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