

The New Criterion

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by Roger Kimball

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Oscar Wilde once said that a man had to have a heart of stone to read Dickens's cloying portrayal of the death of little Nell without laughing. Had he been with us to witness the incontinent cataract of sentimental rubbish that greeted the death of the journalist David Halberstam (actually, the invariable epithet was "the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam"), Wilde would have added that it took a stomach of steel to digest it all without . . . well, you know.

Halberstam was 73 when he died in a car crash in California last month. He had long occupied an inviolable place in the pantheon of liberal demigods, a position he secured in 1972 with his book *The Best and The Brightest*, his attack on the Vietnam War and those who were prosecuting it in the United States. I lost count of the number of encomia that employed variations on the phrase "speaking truth to power." "A Journalistic Witness to Truth" (*Newsweek*); "Speaking Truth To Power All His Life" (*The Fort Worth Star Telegram*); "Working the Truth Beat" (*The New York Times*); "Halberstam Spoke Truth to Power" (*The Anniston Star*); "David Halberstam Spoke Truth to Power; He was the stuff of legend, and it is nothing less than a national tragedy that so great a voice," etc., etc. (*Editor & Publisher*).

At *The New Criterion*, we have long considered it part of our duty to help readers pick their way through such hyperbole, and I am pleased to offer this regular service by recalling a review essay that my colleague Hilton Kramer wrote in *The New Criterion* about Mr. Halberstam in 1993 on the occasion of the publication of his book *The Fifties*. Hilton began his piece by recalling a conversation he had had some twenty years before with a seasoned foreign correspondent who cast a cold eye on some of the most conspicuous younger practitioners of the trade. "They thought the real enemy in Vietnam was the USA," this fellow observed. And although "they weren't Communists themselves," they nonetheless "proved to be complete suckers for the anti-anti-Communist line" then ascendant in the Western press.

History for a lot of these guys began with the election of John F. Kennedy, and most of them thought Bobby Kennedy was a saint. In Vietnam, they had three ambitions: to get out alive, to win a Pulitzer, and to see America defeated. Their whole view of the world was shaped by Vietnam. They saw the world divided into good guys and bad guys, and we were the bad guys. Then, when they had finished their stint in Vietnam, they had to be rewarded with assignments to more glamorous foreign capitals, where they were likely to understand even less than they had in Saigon, and where they seldom knew the language, the history, or the culture of the countries they were writing about. This was the kind of comic-strip coverage of foreign affairs the *Times* was now getting.

anti-Americanism really took hold. If in *The Making of a Quagmire* he could write that "an anti-Communist victory in Vietnam would serve to discourage so-called wars of liberation," a view years later he was part of the anti-war chorus. As Hilton wrote:

It was his second reputation as a writer on Vietnam, this time as an implacable foe of the American intervention, that launched Mr. Halberstam as a best-selling author. In the voluminous pages of *The Best and the Brightest* (1972), he was reborn as a ferocious critic of the war and those responsible for conducting it. President Kennedy was now no longer the good guy he had once been, and his associates, who

David Halberstam fit the paradigm to a "T." Indeed, he might have provided the original mold. In fact, as Hilton points out, Halberstam

was unusual . . . in achieving not one but two reputations as a writer on the Vietnam War. The first was as a champion of the Kennedy intervention in Vietnam, the brutal and disastrous removal of the Diem regime in Saigon, and the view that the United States had an important stake in opposing Communism in Vietnam. This was still his view in *The Making of a Quagmire* (1965), his first book on the subject.

This David Halberstam sung a far more astringent song than his successor: "I believe that Vietnam is a legitimate part of that [American] global commitment," he wrote in 1965. "'A strategic country in a key area, it is perhaps one of only five or six nations in the world that is truly vital to U.S. interests.'" But that was then, *in* the 1960s, but before the virus of 1960s left-wing

had gone on to serve under President Johnson, were even worse. Only Bobby Kennedy, “who had been primarily responsible for the counterinsurgency enthusiasm,” as Mr. Halberstam acknowledged, was absolved from the consequences of his role because of what was said to be his “capacity to grow and change and admit error.” Between *The Making of a Quagmire* and *The Best and the Brightest*, Mr. Halberstam had taken time out to join the ranks of the Bobby Kennedy hagiographers by writing *The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy*; he also wrote *Ho*, an admiring little book about Ho Chi Minh. These smoothed the way for Mr. Halberstam’s own re-emergence as a politically correct anti-war liberal know-it-all in *The Best and the Brightest*. It is in the nature of journalism, of course, for its practitioners to be allowed to reinvent themselves as events require, and Mr. Halberstam proved to be a dab hand at negotiating the terrain separating one realm of received opinion from another. It is the one talent that has never failed him.

So it is no surprise that when he got around to writing about the 1950s, Mr. Halberstam painted it as an inglorious decade of stultifying conformity. Hilton notes that in the very detailed index for the book, the entire entry for “Communism” is: “Communism, see McCarthyism, McCarthy era; specific countries and conflicts.” This is of a piece with Halberstam’s grotesque misapprehension of the historical reality he was writing about. “What dominates this Left-liberal mythology of the Fifties,” Hilton wrote,

is the notion of an entire society in the grip of politically inspired paranoid fear, abject social conformism, empty-headed consumerism, and spiritual sterility. From a reading of *The Fifties* you would have no idea that the United States emerged in that decade as the unrivaled center of the international art scene, that in the ballets of George Balanchine it had produced one of the towering artistic achievements of the twentieth century, or that its system of public education still commanded standards that from the perspective of the 1990s look almost utopian in intellectual quality. You could have no idea, either, of what the ethos and freedom of the country’s civic order consisted of, and certainly no idea of what its rich intellectual life encompassed. Of that intellectual life Mr. Halberstam seems to have remained blissfully ignorant at the time, though he was graduated from Harvard in 1955, and he has apparently been too busy with his journalistic chores to catch up with it

in the interim. His is a mind so completely saturated with the cultural clichés of the 1960s, the period of his first success, that no other ideas have ever been allowed to violate its shallow certainties. The sheer spaciousness that came into American life in the 1950s after the ordeals of the Depression era and the fearful trauma of the war years is a closed book to him—as, indeed, are most of the major books of the period.

As Hilton shows in eloquent detail, far from "speaking truth to power," David Halberstam was part of the mendacious clique that now so loudly mourns the passing of one of its more boisterous cheerleaders. I suppose it is not surprising that the journalistic fraternity would indulge in this orgy of sentimental twaddle over David Halberstam. (An honorable exception was this editorial in *The New York Sun*.) I am grateful, though, to have Hilton Kramer's sober reflections as an alternative and, indeed, an antidote. Read the whole essay here.

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