

Asking Obama to Protect Gaza Relief Ship

Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who has signed on to participate in a new attempt to bring relief supplies to Palestinians living in Gaza, asks President Barack Obama to intercede with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to allow the ship, "The Audacity of Hope," to reach its destination.

Open Letter to President Obama

By Ray McGovern (for the passengers and crew of "The Audacity of Hope" to Gaza)

May 19, 2011

Dear Mr. President:

Your speech on the Middle East earlier today emboldens me to claim your protection as we set out to put flesh on your rhetoric. Fifty of your fellow citizens will be sailing on "The Audacity of Hope" to Gaza next month.

You spoke eloquently today about "times in the course of history when the action of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years." And you lamented "failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people."

We, the passengers and crew of "The Audacity of Hope," sailing to Gaza in June together with the 2nd International Freedom Flotilla, represent ordinary Americans determined to speak to the aspirations of the 1.5 million ordinary Gazans yearning to be free.

We will be delivering thousands of letters of support and friendship from other ordinary Americans who are persuaded, as Dr. King put it, that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

I write you for assurance of your support and protection as we try to embody your rhetoric. You emphasized that "the United States supports a set of universal rights," and that this U.S. support is "not a secondary interest." It is, rather, "a top priority that must be translated into concrete actions."

Bold words. With respect to the situation in Gaza, though, perhaps you will agree that it hardly suffices to bemoan the fate of one "Palestinian who lost three daughters to Israeli shells in Gaza," who, as you put it, has a "right to feel angry."

That Palestinian and his dead daughters are four, but 1,400 Gazans were killed by Israeli forces in December 1998-January 1999, and 1.5 million Gazans remain deprived of the universal rights of which you spoke.

Gaza is a sequestered, crowded open-air prison, in which Israel keeps “inmates” at a subsistence level of existence. This amounts to the kind of collective punishment banned by international law and is enforced by an equally illegal Israeli naval blockade.

Many Americans have long been puzzled that you choose to exempt Gazans from your concern about universal rights, and have tired of waiting for a cogent explanation. So we ask you to look upon our voyage to Gaza as our attempt to implement your rhetoric about what ordinary citizens can do, not only to “speak” but to act to meet the broader aspirations of the ordinary people of Gaza.

On May 20, you will have an opportunity to inform Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of our intention to sail to Gaza next month. You have probably already been briefed on Israel’s far-flung diplomatic and propaganda offensive to prevent our boat and the other boats of the international flotilla from embarking for Gaza.

Indeed, the Israelis may be emboldened by your lack of response to the killing of nine passengers, including an American citizen, on the 2010 relief flotilla and the wounding of dozens of other peaceful passengers. This year we expect you to speak up for us beforehand.

And please do not try to pretend that \$3 billion of our taxes, our annual gift to Israel, cannot be translated into the kind of leverage that will spare “The Audacity of Hope” from harm at the hands of the “Israeli Defense Forces.”

Finally, allow me to suggest talking points not likely to be included in your briefing papers. These points transcend rhetoric and spring from a faith heritage you share with Netanyahu. They deal with the doing of justice, the preoccupation of the prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Before your meeting, have a look at what Isaiah says about “proclaiming liberty to captives and release to prisoners” and how Jesus of Nazareth repeats that, word for word, eight centuries later. Think about it, and be prepared to put justice above politics.

Please let us – and the world – know how the discussion goes.

Yours truly,

Ray McGovern

Ray McGovern served as an Army infantry/intelligence officer in the early 1960s and then as a CIA analyst for 27 years. In the early 1980s, he prepared and presented, one-on-one, the *President’s Daily Brief*. He now works for Tell the

Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington.

Perp-Walking the Wrong Banker?

The sexual-assault arrest of International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn touched off a frenzy of media coverage in New York, including repeated showing of the French banker looking disheveled in handcuffs. But Danny Schechter pines for the day when the Wall Street schemers who caused the 2008 financial meltdown get their perp walks.

By Danny Schechter

May 19, 2011

My colleague Mike Whitney asks: “So, what are the chances that Dominique Strauss-Kahn will get a fair trial now that he’s been blasted as a serial sex offender in about 3,000 articles and in all the televised news reports?”

And there’s another question, the different standards of media outrage expressed over the massive harm inflicted on millions by Wall Street’s collapse in 2008 and the current allegations of sexual assault against the former head of the International Monetary Fund.

Whitney asks: “Do you remember any Wall Street bankers being dragged off in handcuffs when they blew up the financial system and bilked people out of trillions of dollars?”

The answer to both questions is certainly *non* in French or no in English, but there’s more to the connection between Sex and Wall Street.

Without commenting on the evidence in this case, which has been asserted, not proven – there is a deeper context that is being ignored.

I call it the Testosterone Factor in *The Crime of Our Time*, my book about how Wall Street criminally engineered the financial crisis.

Interesting isn’t it that there have been so few references to the link between the pervasiveness of salacious sex in the world of Wall Street and the hyper-charged life of a class of “entitled” wealthy bankers who live off others with few rules or restraints.

There is also scant news about the practices of the IMF, which is often accused

of raping poor and vulnerable countries with unfair “structural adjustment programs.”

Strauss-Kahn, who was IMF chief until resigning Wednesday, is now experiencing what many in France feel is an unfair “personal adjustment program” at the hands of the New York cops and courts. There also has been some speculation, but no evidence, that Strauss-Kahn may have been set up by powerful enemies.

Still, odd isn't it that there have been so few references in the coverage to Eliot Spitzer, the one time “Sheriff” of Wall Street who was denouncing criminal financial practices by the Bush administration when he was brought down in a sex scandal.

Strauss-Kahn had also been in the news lately as a possible Socialist presidential candidate to topple the U.S. government's pal in France, President Nicolas Sarkozy.

DSK, as Strauss-Kahn is called, was a critic, too, of U.S. banking practices. He recently outraged Official Washington by asserting that the Chinese economy was surpassing ours.

In both cases the sex scandals of Spitzer and DSK powerful forces had motives to bring down such potential reformers, but it is also true, that in each case, these men themselves were, on the surface anyway, sexually obsessed and prone to illegal behavior that put them, and others, at risk.

Both are Alpha Males known for pushing envelopes of personal responsibility. Both were known for their arrogance and living in highly secretive sexualized personal cultures. Writer Tristan Banon claimed she had to fight DSK off in an earlier incident, calling him a “strutting chimpanzee.”

But bear in mind that part of what intelligence agencies do these days in targeting people is to prepare sophisticated psychological profiles before intervening. They realize that the knowledge of the secret lives and kinkiness of public figures can easily discredit them. Spy agencies specialize in foraging for dirt and can leak information or use it opportunistically.

Remember Richard Nixon's authorized break-in at the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist pursuing highly personal information? Nothing is off-limits as people like former weapons inspector Scott Ritter learned as well when he became embroiled in a mini-sex caper.

Also, when people are highly stressed, they are prone to making mistakes. The agencies shadowing them know that, and from time to time, encourage it or just wait for the opportunity to help these targets bring themselves down.

But what needs to be examined further is how the crimes of the rich and powerful are treated, often quite differently. Bush's invasion of Iraq and Geithner's tax maneuvers are mostly ignored. But when sex is involved, all bets are off.

Sex scandals have become a staple of media exploitation with personal morality plays trumping political morality confrontations every time.

They are both great distractions and effective tools of character assassination which are often more effective than more violent ways to neutralize people considered dangerous.

That's why the FBI was so hot to discredit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with leaks of so-called wiretapped sex tapes. In his case, this tactic failed but the other more literal form of assassination worked.

In some cases, both tactics are deployed as in the physical assassination of Bin Laden and then the character-killing aimed at his supporters through the release of porn allegedly found in his "lair."

Sex and Money

Illicit sex and the avaricious financial world, whether Wall Street or La Defense, France's financial district, have long been linked, writes Heidi Moore:

"This is all a reminder that the financial district hasn't always been gleaming skyscrapers and Starbucks.

Consider this passage from *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*:

"Adjacent to the Wall Street business district, prostitutes worked in saloons along Greenwich Street, taking men upstairs. In addition, immediately south of Wall Street was the Battery Tender-loin, on Whitehall Street.

"The Water Street area, however, remained the most significant and poorest waterfront zone of prostitution. Amid the rookeries, rat pits and dance halls, prostitutes exposed in each window to the public view plied their trade."

In the modern era, many of the street's most macho traders are, according to David Russell who worked in the industry for two decades, known as "swinging dicks."

It is well known that the big money in Wall Street has kept a vibrant, upscale sex industry alive and well.

There has been one scandal after another. Here are a few cases cited by Moore

before Spitzer's demise:

–BP Chief Executive John Browne left both his post at the oil company and his directorship at Goldman Sachs Group last year after it was revealed that Lord Browne had lied to a court about his young male lover, whom he had met through an escort-service Web site.

–A group of six women sued Dresdner Kleinwort in 2006 for \$1.4 billion on allegations that male executives entertained clients at strip clubs and even brought prostitutes back to the office. The case was settled out of court in 2007.

–Canadian hedge fund manager Paul Eustace in 2007, by his own admission in a deposition filed in court lied to investors and cheated on his wife with a stripper.

–In 1987, Peter Detwiler, vice chairman of E.F. Hutton & Co., was, according to court testimony, instructed by his client, Tesoro Petroleum Corp. Chairman Robert V. West, to hire a blonde prostitute for the finance minister of Trinidad & Tobago, which had been supporting a tax issue that would have hurt Tesoro's profits.

–A woman claiming to have been Bernard Madoff's mistress published a book about their secret liaisons. Earlier, his secretary said he had a fondness for massages, according to an article in Vanity Fair.

Wall Street's collapse in 2008 is said to have affected Manhattan's sex industry almost as if it had been a fully-owned subsidiary, if not an extension, of the financial services business.

Loretta Napoleoni, an Italian author who worked on Wall Street for years, offers a provocative thesis for how the need for paid sex "on the wild side" became part of the culture of irresponsibility.

"I can tell you that this is absolutely true because being a woman, having worked in finance 20 years ago I could tell you that even at that time when the market was not going up so much these guys, all they talk is sex."

She complemented her personal experience by citing a study by researchers from Oxford University.

"The study discovered, that an excessive production of testosterone, in a period of fantastic financial exuberance, creates a sort of confusion.

"It is what people in sports call 'being in the zone,' which means you get in a certain situation where you feel that you will always win. That you are

infallible.”

To find out more, I spoke to Jonathan Albert, a psychologist practicing in mid-Manhattan.

He told me, “I see a lot of clients in NYC who are impacted by the economic crisis. People deal with stress in many different ways. Some people exercise, some people over-eat, some use drugs and alcohol, some even sexualize those feelings.”

“Sexualize?” I asked him, how do they sexualize these feelings?

His response, “I’ve seen a lot of Wall Streeters who sexualize feelings of anxiety and stress and depression. So for example they might rely on adult sexual services to deal with those feelings.”

I asked Dr. Albert if the Oxford study is right and whether the connection between the macho environment of high finance and risky sexual behavior may be endemic in the industry?

His reply, “I do see this a lot in the finance industry, yes, people in positions of power often feel as if they can perhaps get away with it. There is sometimes a sense of entitlement.”

“They feel entitled to take part in risky behavior?” I pressed.

“High-risk behavior. It’s similar to what they do on a daily basis. They invest millions and millions of dollars and there is a great risk involved with that.

“The same is true with using the services of a prostitute. Obviously there are great health risks; their [more traditional personal] relationship is in great danger if they are using the services of a prostitute. A lot of people skate on the excitement, on that euphoric rush.”

Some of Dr. Albert’s clients cope with the pressures on them in kinkier ways:

“They just want to let loose, relax and take a very passive role in their sexual practice. So they may seek out the services of a dominatrix, where they are at the mercy of this sex worker.

“I’ve had clients who seek out services where they get whipped, cuffed, put on a leash like a dog.”

Beating others can also be part of this culture. There is violence lurking to the surface that can easily erupt when desires are denied.

Dr. Albert said the culture of risk on Wall Street was intoxicating to many in

the same way that gamblers become addicted or report a rush when they are winning.

However, the euphoria of life in the fast lane often implodes when one's luck runs out leading to depression and family breakups.

I am not being moralistic here, but a climate of narcissism and living secret lives often desensitizes its practitioners leaving them little time to think of how their actions may affect others. (Or how their economic policies and business practices may hurt their customers or the poor!)

None of this context excuses anything that Strauss-Kahn may or may not have done, but what it does do is shine some light on a culture of aggressive power-driven hyper-sexuality in the world of high finance that our media is often too timid or too hypocritical to investigate.

News Dissector Danny Schechter elaborates on this issue in his book *The Crime of Our Time* and in a DVD extra to his film *Plunder The Crime of Our Time*. (PlunderTheCrimeOfOur Time.com) Comments to dissector@mediachannel.org

Halberstam's 'Best-Brightest' Blunder-2

David Halberstam won acclaim and riches from his influential book, *The Best and the Brightest*, about the making of the Vietnam War, especially during the Kennedy and Johnson years. However, in retrospect, the book's narrative asserting that John Kennedy and his team of East Coast intellectuals arrogantly paved the way to war fails the test of the historical record, writes James DiEugenio in Part Two of his retrospective analysis. (For Part One, [click here.](#))

By James DiEugenio

May 19, 2011

One of the most surprising omissions in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* is that this celebrated book never mentions or references National Security Action Memorandum 263, President John Kennedy's directive to begin the U.S. military withdrawal from Vietnam.

The first phase of this withdrawal was to begin in December of 1963 with the removal of a thousand trainers and then continue in a phased drawdown until 1965 when it would be completed, i.e. all American military personnel would be back home.

It is quite odd that Halberstam's book, published in 1972 when the Pentagon Papers history already was in the public domain, would spend over 300 pages discussing Kennedy's policy on Vietnam and not find the space to mention this important directive.

Halberstam does mention that Kennedy told adviser John K. Galbraith to give him a report about Vietnam, but the author consigns this report to the dustbin by saying that Galbraith's effort was mere window dressing and was on the periphery of Kennedy's administration. (Halberstam, p. 152)

However, as described in Part 1 of this retrospective analysis, the opposite was true. Galbraith's report was a key factor in Kennedy's subsequent instructions to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to prepare a withdrawal plan.

But there is something equally surprising about what Halberstam leaves out of his discussion of President Lyndon Johnson's conduct of the war. Halberstam never mentions or references National Security Action Memorandum 273, which revised and replaced Kennedy's NSAM 263.

Changing Course

In his milestone book on the subject, John Newman spends over four pages discussing just how significant a change in policy Johnson's new directive was. [*JFK and Vietnam*, pgs. 445-449] To name three of the most significant alterations:

- 1.) It allowed for direct U.S. Navy involvement in OPLAN 34 patrols off the coast of North Vietnam, secret military operations that would lead in 1964 to the Tonkin Gulf incident and to the massive U.S. escalation.
- 2.) It allowed for expanded U.S. operations into Laos and Cambodia.
- 3.) While saying it would honor the troop reductions in NSAM 263, NSAM 273 set the nation on a very different course. Not only was Kennedy's phased withdrawal scrapped after his murder on Nov. 22, 1963, but even in the short term, the number of American advisers actually rose.

For an author to write nearly 700 pages about the policies of Kennedy and Johnson on Vietnam and to never mention NSAM's 263 and 273 let alone discuss them represents a form of censorship that distorts history, especially given how influential Halberstam's book has been.

But it is indicative of what Halberstam does to obscure the break in policy that occurred after Kennedy's death. Take another instance: the first Vietnam meeting after Kennedy's death. [Newman pgs. 442-45]

Though it occurred just 48 hours after the assassination, on Nov. 24, it is very difficult to locate this meeting in Halberstam's book.

In fact, you will not find it where you would expect to, in Chapter 16, the first one dealing with LBJ's presidency. You will find a mention of it at the end of Chapter 15, on pages 298-99, where, ostensibly, Halberstam is wrapping up his view of Kennedy and Vietnam.

By placing it there, Halberstam connotes some kind of continuity between the two men, rather than a starkly new direction.

Halberstam clearly tries to imply that this meeting was between only Johnson and Saigon ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge [p. 298], and that Lodge had returned to Washington to give a report on deteriorating conditions in Vietnam.

Not so. Kennedy brought Lodge back to Washington for the express purpose of firing him. [James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, pgs. 374-75]. Part of the reason for the termination was Lodge's role in the demise of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu.

This is a continuation of Halberstam's misrepresentations about Lodge. The author also says Kennedy appointed him ambassador to involve the Republican Party in what could end up as a disaster. [p. 260]

Not true. Kennedy didn't want to appoint Lodge. He wanted his old friend Edmund Gullion as Saigon ambassador, a choice that was vetoed by Secretary of State Dean Rusk who wanted Lodge. [Douglass, pgs. 150-52]

The point is that with Kennedy dead, Lodge was not fired. Instead, he delivered his message to Johnson about how bad things were in Saigon and then took part in a larger meeting, one that is completely absent from *The Best and the Brightest*.

Key Meeting

As John Newman notes, this meeting was attended by Rusk, McNamara, Under Secretary of State George Ball, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and CIA Director John McCone. The discussion was led by Johnson. [Newman, p. 442]

In other words, the leaders of the national security apparatus were on hand to hear a new tone and attitude on the subject of Vietnam.

LBJ uttered phrases that JFK never would have. Johnson declared, "I am not going to lose in Vietnam"; "I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way that China went"; "Tell those generals in Saigon that Lyndon Johnson intends to stand by our word." [Ibid.]

The change was so clear that McCone wrote in his notes: "I received in this meeting the first 'President Johnson tone' for action as contrasted with the 'Kennedy tone.'" [Ibid., p. 443]

Demarcating this break with the past, LBJ also said he had "never been happy with our operations in Vietnam." [Ibid.]

McGeorge Bundy had a similar recollection of LBJ's first Vietnam strategy session: "The President has expressed his deep concern that our effort in Vietnam be stepped up to highest pitch." [Gordon Goldstein, *Lessons in Disaster*, p. 105]

In his book, *In Retrospect*, McNamara also said Johnson's intent was clear at this meeting. Instead of beginning to withdraw, LBJ was going to win the war. [p. 102]

This message then filtered down to each department, which was a reversal of the message that Kennedy had given after the May 1963 SecDef meeting in Hawaii.

Back then, the generals and everyone else understood that any proposal for overt action would invite a negative presidential response. [Probe, Vol. 5, No. 3]

Are we to believe that Halberstam, in his proclaimed 500 interviews, did not interview any of these men about this meeting?

Pentagon Player

President Johnson understood that McNamara was the key to securing the desired change in policy, since McNamara had been the point man behind the scenes and to the media regarding Kennedy's intent to withdraw from Vietnam.

So, in February 1964, LBJ made sure McNamara would be on board the new train as it pulled out of the station.

In a declassified tape, which is transcribed in the James Blight book, *Virtual JFK*, LBJ told McNamara, "I always thought it was foolish for you to make any statements about withdrawing. I thought it was bad psychologically. But you and the President thought otherwise, and I just sat silent." [Blight, p. 310]

For those who have heard this tape, one of the most shocking things about it is McNamara's near-silent bewilderment as to what is happening. And in another conversation two weeks later, LBJ actually wants McNamara to take back or rephrase what he said in 1963 about the initial thousand man withdrawal. [Ibid.]

These conversations vitiate another assertion that Halberstam makes throughout his book, namely that Johnson was somehow subservient to the "best and

brightest" advisers left over from Kennedy's Cabinet.

In one of the most dubious passages in the book, Halberstam says LBJ was in awe of these men and judged them by their labels. [p. 303] Halberstam then tops this silliness by saying that McNamara was the most forceful figure on Vietnam policy in early 1964. [p. 347]

The strong implication is that LBJ bowed to his advisers in making decisions on Vietnam. However, the evidence cited above, and ignored by Halberstam, contradicts that thesis.

Based on the evidence of this first meeting and the taped talks with McNamara, Johnson is the one commandeering *them*. In fact, LBJ often decided to proceed with his escalation plan without their advice at all.

And Johnson's go-it-alone approach was a factor in the exodus from the administration by McCone, Ball, Bundy and eventually McNamara. This evidence of a break in policy from Kennedy's approach is absent from *The Best and the Brightest*.

In Halberstam's defense, one can argue that some of these taped conversations had not yet been declassified. But the man said he did 500 interviews for his book.

Kennedy Insiders

You'd think he must have talked to someone at the Nov. 24, 1963, meeting besides Lodge. Did he not interview JFK insiders Kenneth O'Donnell and Dave Powers, who had been with Kennedy for years, from the start of his political career?

O'Donnell and Powers were in the White House for the decisions about Vietnam under both Kennedy and Johnson. They could have told Halberstam about NSAM 263 as well as McNamara's announcement about the thousand-troop withdrawal and the plans for complete withdrawal by 1965.

The two JFK aides also would have told Halberstam that LBJ changed all this within days of taking office.

How do we know they would have told him so? Because they wrote about all this in their book about Kennedy, *Johnny We Hardly Knew Ye*, which was published in 1972, the same year that *The Best and the Brightest* came out. [O'Donnell and Powers, pgs. 13-18]

However, by not listing the identities of his interview subjects, Halberstam covered his tracks well. The omission prevents anyone from checking on whom he talked to and what they told him.

So, in this landmark book about how the Vietnam War decisions were made, Halberstam leaves out Kennedy's NSAM 263 along with the discussion and announcement about it; ignores Johnson's NSAM 273, which undercut NSAM 263; and misses many of the key details about the Nov. 24 meeting, the first Vietnam strategy session held by Johnson.

What's perhaps most troubling about these lapses is that they are not inconsequential but instead are essential for advancing Halberstam's core thesis: that Kennedy and his crew of can-do intellectuals (the best and the brightest) allowed their arrogance and hubris to plunge the United States into a disastrous war, with Johnson just along for the ride.

However, if Halberstam had filled in the gaps showing that JFK and some of his top aides had been maneuvering toward a withdrawal and that LBJ and his cowboy approach had reversed that goal the author would have had to scrap his book and start over.

In other words, this widely acclaimed work of "history" was more a case of a reporter not letting the facts get in the way of a good story than a careful examination of the historical record, even what was available in the early 1970s when Halberstam was completing his manuscript.

Change in Tone

As Gordon Goldstein astutely notes in *Lessons in Disaster*, Johnson's change in tone, attitude and emphasis after Kennedy's assassination were not just rhetorical. Within a little over three months, Johnson had assigned Kennedy's withdrawal plan to oblivion.

It was replaced by a whole new plan for waging war. Goldstein does a nice job summarizing the steps that Johnson took to get there.

LBJ first sent McNamara to Saigon to render a report on the conditions in country. Since McNamara got the pro-war message at the Nov. 24 meeting and since the intelligence reports had now been altered to reflect true conditions, at Christmas 1963, McNamara brought back a negative report. [Goldstein, p. 107]

One month later, after McNamara relayed this report, the Joint Chiefs sent a proposal to Johnson on how to save the day: bombing of the North and insertion of combat troops. [Ibid., p. 108]

As Goldstein writes, "Exactly two months after Kennedy's death, the chiefs were proposing air strikes against Hanoi and the deployment of US troops, not just in an advisory role, but in offensive operations against the North. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were proposing the initial steps to Americanize the Vietnam

War." [Ibid., p. 108]

LBJ turned down the Joint Chiefs' proposal, but not for the reasons JFK had. Rather, Johnson did not yet have Congress on board as a partner. [Ibid., p. 109] But he did order the preparation of NSAM 288.

First proposed in early March 1964 during a discussion between the Joint Chiefs and Johnson, NSAM 288 included both air and naval elements to directly participate in the targeting of up to 94 military and industrial sites in North Vietnam.

In addition, it proposed the mining of harbors, imposition of a naval blockade, and in case China intervened, the use of nuclear weapons. [Ibid., p. 108] In other words, it was a full order of battle.

Thus, Johnson achieved in a bit over three months what Kennedy had resisted for three years.

It takes Goldstein about 10 pages to proceed from Kennedy's assassination to the construction of NSAM 288. It takes Halberstam over 50 pages to get to this same point, thus obscuring indeed concealing the significance of this turning point.

Boring Bios

How does Halberstam pull off his feat? He employs one of the book's annoying literary devices; he stops the narrative flow of the book to insert a mini-biography of a character, whether apropos or not.

Chapter 16 is where the author begins his discussion of Johnson's presidency. But NSAM 288 is not part of that chapter, even though the action memorandum was proposed about three months after LBJ took the oath of office.

What does Halberstam deem as being more important than LBJ's plan for American forces to directly attack North Vietnam? Well, for starters, how about a biography of Dean Rusk, which goes on for about 15 pages. [Halberstam pgs. 307-322]

In this curious account of Rusk, Halberstam describes the Secretary of State as a liberal [p. 309], though Rusk would be more correctly characterized as a Vietnam hawk whom Kennedy wanted to fire.

But then Halberstam tops himself. He segues off into a biography of Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson! I yawned my way through this biographical filler.

These biographical inserts serve as a sleight of hand, distracting the reader

from the dramatic post-assassination shift in U.S. war policy which, if the reader understood these facts, would expose the central fallacy of Halberstam's thesis.

Halberstam also used the Rusk biography to foster another false tenet. He ends Chapter 16 by saying that 1964 was a lost year with much of the blame for that falling on Rusk. [p. 346]

However, both these proclamations, that 1964 was a lost year and that it was attributable to Rusk, are simply false. Many authors, such as Fredrik Logevall, argue that 1964 was the key year of the war.

Johnson was not just reversing Kennedy's planned withdrawal, but was mapping out plans to commit U.S. combat forces, which amounted to a sea change in policy, the Americanization of the Vietnam War.

Second, Rusk had little to do with the 1964 decision-making, which was done by Johnson in cooperation with the Pentagon after LBJ had turned McNamara around.

False Assertion

Another way that Halberstam camouflages the stark differences between Kennedy and Johnson on Vietnam is by deploying what we now know to be a false assertion as unchallengeable fact.

At the beginning of Chapter 16, Halberstam writes the following: "The decision in those early months was to hold the line on Vietnam. To hold it down and delay decisions." [p. 303]

In reality, NSAM 288, the plan for a wider war, was put together in March 1964. How was that holding the line on Vietnam, since it completely broke with Kennedy's previous policy?

But Halberstam had to maintain his false narrative that LBJ was simply the captive of the holdover JFK hot-shots so the decisive policy reversals get repackaged as a decision "to hold the line."

Still, Halberstam's neglect of NSAM 288 is only half the story. He also misrepresents and underplays what Johnson did next.

After the Joint Chiefs' draft of NSAM 288 was orally accepted by Johnson, he called McGeorge Bundy, a sequence of events that itself undercuts Halberstam's thesis that Bundy and other Kennedy aides were maneuvering Johnson toward war. [Goldstein pgs. 108-09]

Although Johnson had accepted NSAM 288 in principle, he saw two impediments to

activating it.

First, he did not have a congressional war resolution. Second, Johnson told Bundy, "And for nine months I'm just an inherited, I'm a trustee. I've got to win an election." [Ibid., p. 109]

Johnson then proceeded to address those two problems. In August 1964, Johnson exploited the dubious Gulf of Tonkin incident to secure a broad war-powers resolution from Congress. By November, he had won a landslide election, partly by running as a moderate peace candidate.

In reading *The Best and the Brightest*, these steps all seem haphazard, coincidental, willy-nilly. This impression is achieved because the author never makes clear one of the most important aspects of Johnson's alterations to NSAM 273.

Direct U.S. Role

As John Newman points out, when LBJ was presented with the rough draft of the directive, he altered it in more ways than one. Paragraph seven had originally stated that South Vietnam should begin to build a maritime war apparatus .

Johnson's alterations allowed for the United States to plan and execute *its own* maritime operations against the North. [Newman, *JFK and Vietnam*, p. 446]

This alteration, specifically requested by Johnson, paved the way for direct American attacks via a covert action plan called OPLAN 34 A, which was submitted to the White House one month later. [Ibid.]

This plan included a joint CIA/Pentagon action that allowed for American destroyers to patrol the coast of North Vietnam accompanied by small attack boats piloted by South Vietnamese sailors.

The idea was that the smaller boats would fire on the North and the American destroyers would then record the North Vietnamese response to figure out what capabilities the enemy had.

Clearly, the concept amounted to a provocation to the North that invited an attack on U.S. vessels.

As Edwin Moise points out, LBJ approved it because he had already made the decision that the wider-war plan, encompassed in NSAM 288, would be carried out in the near future.

Johnson's strategy was a way of negating any attacks from hawkish GOP presidential contenders like Barry Goldwater or Richard Nixon. [Moise, *Tonkin*

Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War, p. 26]

The scheme was all finalized in May and June 1964, with the finishing touches placed on it by William Bundy. In June, Johnson began to lobby certain key members of Congress for its passage of a war resolution. [Moise, p. 26]

It is important to recall that this was almost two months before the Tonkin Gulf incident. Indeed, on June 10, McNamara anticipated the benefits from an example of North Vietnamese hostility.

“That in the event of a dramatic event in Southeast Asia we would go promptly for a congressional resolution,” McNamara said. [Ibid.]

However, since LBJ had to play the moderate in order to win in November, Bill Bundy added that the actual decision to expand the war would not be made until after the election. [Moise, p. 44]

But Bundy’s assertion was a lie. With the writing of NSAM 288, something unthinkable under Kennedy the decision to expand the war had already been made. Still, since the directive was classified at the time, the lie had wings.

As Newman pointed out, Johnson was concealing his escalation plan so as not to lose his 1964 electoral base in the Democratic Party.

Just about all of this is either absent from or seriously discounted by Halberstam’s book.

Clearly, these events were not haphazard. They followed a straight line from Johnson’s NSAM 273 to OPLAN 34A to the drafting of NSAM 288 to the lobbying of Congress.

All that was needed now was for the provocation strategy to succeed, for the “dramatic event” to take place so the resolution could be rushed through Congress.

This actual history renders ridiculous Halberstam’s idea that “the decision in those early months” of 1964 was to hold the line on Vietnam.

Instead of delving deeply into the pivotal events of those months after Kennedy was killed, Halberstam gives us biographies of Dean Acheson and John Paton Davies.

The Dramatic Event

With the planning already in place, all that was needed was the “dramatic event.”

According to Halberstam, the Gulf of Tonkin incident traced back to January 1964, when the plans for OPLAN 34A were being worked out. [p. 408] The Vietnam War's casus belli actually originated in the alterations Johnson made to the draft of NSAM 273 in November 1963.

Bundy told Newman that these alterations were directed by Johnson since LBJ "held stronger views on the war than Kennedy did." [Newman, p. 445]

Halberstam also mischaracterizes the purpose of these covert operations. He writes that they were meant to "make Hanoi pay a little for its pressure on the South, to hit back at the enemy, to raise morale in the South." [Halberstam p. 408]

Again, this is wrong. As Edwin Moise writes, outside of the South Vietnamese sailors on the fast-attack speedboats, everything about these so-called DESOTO patrols was American. [Moise, p. 55]

The North Vietnamese knew the South Vietnamese did not have destroyers. Further, the destroyers violated the territorial waters of North Vietnam. Thus, as many authors have written, these missions were designed as a provocation.

It was a way for the U.S. to get directly involved in a civil war. [Moise, p. 68] Even people in Johnson's administration, like John McCone and Jim Forrestal, later admitted they were such. [Goldstein, p. 125]

Halberstam also screws up the tandem nature of the missions. The destroyers and the speedboats worked together, with the speedboats making the attacks and the destroyers supposedly monitoring the reactions to detect the North's radar capabilities.

Halberstam tries to separate the two and tries to say the destroyers actually simulated attacks. [Halberstam, p. 411]

To finish off his poor representation of what happened in the Gulf of Tonkin, Halberstam insinuates that Johnson wanted to wait for more accurate information about what happened. [Halberstam, p. 412-13]

In fact, after taking the initial incident on Aug. 2 quite lightly, Johnson ordered a second mission the next day, which included violating North Vietnam's territorial waters. [Moise, 105]

The President then marched down to McGeorge Bundy's office before he even knew what had happened on the second patrol. [Goldstein, p. 126] He told Bundy to take out the draft resolution prepared by his brother William.

Bundy told him, "Mr. President, we ought to think about this."

Johnson replied, "I didn't ask you what you thought, I told you what to *do*."
[Ibid.]

Stamped Congress

Johnson's determination to exploit the Tonkin Gulf incident as a justification for securing congressional approval for the war further undercuts Halberstam's core thesis that Kennedy's best and brightest were pushing LBJ to stay on JFK's path toward war.

There is another aspect of the Tonkin Gulf incident that demonstrates just how intent Johnson was to protect his right flank in an election year.

Johnson took out the target list from NSAM 288 and picked out what he wanted to hit. It was getting late and he wanted to reach a national television audience, so he made the announcement on live TV.

The announcement alerted North Vietnam to the incoming planes, so they prepared their anti-aircraft batteries. In part because Johnson desired to announce the attacks before they took place, two pilots were shot down. [Moise, p. 219]

After the air sorties, a jubilant Johnson said, "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh, I cut his pecker off." [Logevall, p. 205]

Johnson then lied to Sen. William Fulbright of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Since Fulbright was running the hearings on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Johnson told him that OPLAN 34A was a South Vietnamese operation. [Moise, p. 227]

That did the trick. The resolution sailed through both houses almost without opposition. Johnson's plan to get Congress on board as his war partner had worked.

LBJ, a former Senate majority leader legendary for twisting arms and manipulating the congressional system, proclaimed that the Tonkin Gulf resolution was like grandma's nightie. It covered everything. [Logevall, p. 205]

But how mistaken is Halberstam about this whole scenario? Regarding the Gulf of Tonkin, he quotes Walt Rostow as saying that things could not have turned out better if they had been planned that way. [Halberstam, p. 414]

The author missed the irony. They *had* been planned that way.

Keeping all this in mind, let us recall what Halberstam wrote in introducing the Johnson administration and its attitude toward Vietnam, that it had decided not to deal with Vietnam in 1964 but to keep its options open. [p. 307]

Peace Potential

As both Logevall and Goldstein note, Johnson had opportunities to begin Vietnam peace negotiations throughout 1964. Goldstein points out, too, that there were other influential peace-oriented viewpoints being expressed regarding Vietnam.

Luminaries like journalist Walter Lippmann, French Premier Charles DeGaulle and Sen. Richard Russell were all pushing for a neutralization plan, something like Kennedy had done in Laos.

DeGaulle specifically warned U.S. diplomat George Ball that the longer the American advisers stayed in Vietnam, the more painful and humiliating their exit would be.

Not only did Johnson ignore these entreaties, as time went on he began to express personal hostility towards journalists and heads of state who tried to press him on this issue. [Logevall, *Choosing War*, pgs. 143, 176]

LBJ even ostracized people inside the White House who advised him against escalation, such as Vice President Hubert Humphrey. [Ibid., p. 170] All this, even though North Vietnam made it clear that it was willing to talk.

The North Vietnamese even offered a cease-fire in return for negotiations, which would have included the NLF, the political arm of the Viet Cong, at the table. [Ibid, p. 163]

Other countries, like Canada, offered to broker a meeting. Leaders like United Nations Secretary General U Thant tried to get talks going. But Johnson would not seriously entertain peace plans. [Logevall, p. 211]

As Logevall makes clear, Johnson was so intent on getting America directly involved in Vietnam, he seriously contemplated attacking the North in May 1964. [Ibid., p. 147] But national public opinion did not favor an attack at the time.

So Johnson did something that Halberstam either does not know about or deliberately ignored. He ordered a propaganda campaign to change public attitudes about a U.S. war in Vietnam.

Run out of the State Department, it was two pronged. One prong was aimed at domestic opinion and the other at foreign opinion.

The project was memorialized in NSAM 308. [Ibid., p. 152] In other words, the administration was now trying to psychologically indoctrinate the American public – and international opinion – into accepting a war with Hanoi.

So, when Halberstam's "liberal" Secretary of State Dean Rusk visited Williams

College in June 1964, Rusk called South Vietnam as important to America and the free world as West Berlin. [Logevall, p. 168]

Rusk also tried to recruit international allies for the coming conflict.

Target Date

As Logevall makes clear, LBJ and Bill Bundy had already targeted a date for the direct American intervention in Vietnam, January 1965, after the presidential election. [Logevall, p. 217]

However, by summer 1964, Johnson had reports on his desk telling him just how difficult the war would be. There was one report which said a bombing campaign would have little effect on the North since there were few industrial centers to hit.

There were two studies on the effect of combat troops in country. Both projected that it would take over 500,000 men and five to 10 years to subdue the enemy.

This was actually a part of the story where Halberstam did a good job of reporting what was going on inside the Johnson administration. [Halberstam, pgs. 356, 370, 462]

Despite the warnings, Johnson still refused to contemplate negotiations or withdrawal. He pressed forward with his propaganda campaign and his plans for war.

As Logevall acutely notes, Johnson kept all the negative assessments from the public so it would not become an election issue.

Through the campaign, Johnson hammered Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater as the war candidate. LBJ wore the popular mantle as the man of peace.

In the last days of the campaign, Johnson vowed to “stay out of a shooting war” in Vietnam and insisted that he was working for a peaceful solution. [Logevall, p. 250]

Johnson also repeated the axiom that he was not going to “send American boys to fight a war Asian boys should fight for themselves.” [Ibid, p. 253]

Lying About War

Of course, the opposite was true. But Halberstam could not bring himself to acknowledge that LBJ had lied his head off about his true intentions in Vietnam.

The author makes excuses for Johnson, such as saying that the drift toward war in 1964 took place “very subtly.” [Halberstam p. 361] Yet, there was nothing

subtle about lying a country into a war.

Logevall manages an honesty that Halberstam cannot match: "If an American president had ever promised anything to the American people, then Lyndon Johnson had promised to keep the United States out of the war in Vietnam." [Logevall, p. 253]

The exact opposite happened. In another key event that Halberstam missed in his 500 interviews was that on the day of the election with an LBJ landslide looming Johnson's war planning committee met to begin discussing how to implement an expanded American war in Vietnam. [Logevall, p. 258]

The tragic point is that in late 1964, LBJ could have gotten out of Vietnam with limited political damage. He had huge Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress that would have covered him.

Many influential Democratic senators did not favor a U.S. combat role, such as Mike Mansfield, Frank Church, Gaylord Nelson, William Fulbright and Richard Russell.

In the U.S. news media, Lippmann was still advising against an attack on the North. Most major newspapers also did not favor going to war, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Only 24 percent of the public favored sending in combat troops, while over half favored withdrawal. [Logevall, pgs. 277-284]

Globally, both England and France advised Johnson not to expand the war.

Later, Bill Bundy admitted that Johnson could have gotten out at this point without taking a huge hit in popularity. [Ibid., p. 288]

'Inevitable' War

However, in pursuing his "inevitable tragedy" narrative driven by the egos of JFK's best-and-brightest elitists Halberstam ignores these factors. What the history really tells us is that the Vietnam War was inevitable because LBJ made it so.

But Halberstam takes every opportunity to disguise what was really happening in 1964, as Johnson redirected the government toward the wider war that LBJ insisted he did not seek.

"In the country and in the government, however, there was no clear sense of going to war," Halberstam wrote. [p. 399] That may have been true about most of the country, but not the White House where Johnson saw his election victory as just an obstacle to clear before going to war.

On this same page, Halberstam makes one of the most dubious parallels in the entire book. He says the planning for Vietnam was derived from the Cuban missile crisis. [Halberstam, p. 399]

This makes me wonder if he ever read anything about the missile crisis because *there was no planning for the missile crisis*. It was an emergency, an impromptu 13-day crisis situation that could have immediately triggered an exchange of nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, American entry into Vietnam had been talked about by three administrations since 1954. There was no compelling crisis, nor an immediate threat to the United States.

The White House reactions to the two problems were also strikingly different.

During the missile crisis, Kennedy sought the input of all his advisers and realizing that most of them especially military officials at the Pentagon wanted to attack Cuba, he took the least provocative action, the naval blockade.

He then went around his Cabinet, including Vice President Johnson, and arranged a back-channel to the Russians to reach a settlement. All in less than two weeks.

This is almost an opposite template for what Johnson did on Vietnam. From the first meeting, Johnson was not soliciting input, but was dictating to his advisers what they should do. For 13 months, he shunned negotiations.

A Battle Plan

Johnson put together a battle plan and tried to indoctrinate the country to accept it. At the first chance the Tonkin Gulf incident provoked by the United States LBJ deployed American air power to attack North Vietnam.

By contrast, Kennedy faced two incidents during the missile crisis that invited a retaliatory strike at Cuba after a U-2 spy plane was shot down and after a Russian ship fired at an American ship.

In both cases, JFK chose not to escalate tensions and steered the crisis to a peaceful resolution.

However, in dogged pursuit of his thesis that the arrogant belligerence of Kennedy's best and brightest caused the Vietnam War, Halberstam ignores all these salient points about the Cuban missile crisis.

He presses ahead with his insistence that there was continuity between JFK's approach to a crisis and LBJ's. In other words, LBJ was not just stuck with

Kennedy's hubristic advisers but on Vietnam was following Kennedy's Cuban crisis model as well.

The historical reality, however, was the opposite. Johnson was not seeking to defuse a crisis; he was stoking one and doing so in a premeditated fashion.

In accordance with his escalation timetable of January 1965, Johnson sent Secretary of State Rusk to talk to Sen. Fulbright to stifle any open debate in the Senate. This congressional maneuvering required that the target date be pushed back a month.

Yet, instead of addressing this and other evidence of Johnson's scheming, Halberstam focuses on McGeorge Bundy's visit to South Vietnam and the famous attack at Pleiku in early February while Bundy was there. [Halberstam, p. 520]

This attack by the Viet Cong injured and killed several American advisers and wounded scores more. [Goldstein, p. 155] Bundy sent back a memo on this incident that recommended retaliatory air strikes.

Huge Milestone

Halberstam turns this Bundy memo into a huge milestone of U.S. escalation of the war. Even while discounting the value of other documents supposedly because Johnson liked to use the phone Halberstam calls this memo one of the most memorable and important documents on the road to a larger war.

Playing up the Bundy memo, of course, fits with Halberstam's preferred storyline since Bundy was a Kennedy holdover but the memo and the Pleiku attack were more way stations along the route rather than true turning points.

As we have seen, the direct U.S. combat role in Vietnam had been decided months before. Chester Cooper, who worked on the NSC staff and then under diplomat Averell Harriman for both Kennedy and Johnson, explained that reality.

"The problem was Johnson had already made up his mind," Cooper said. "For all practical purposes, he had dismissed the option of de-escalating and getting out, but he didn't want to say that he had, so the rationale for [Bundy's] trip was this was going to be decisive."

Cooper then adds, Johnson had "damn well decided already what he was going to do." [Logevall, p. 319]

The second problem with Halberstam giving the Pleiku memo so much weight is that Bundy had been a hawk from the beginning and was simply reiterating a sentiment that he expressed earlier.

In 1961, during Kennedy's two-week debate over sending in combat troops, Bundy had drafted his "swimming pool memo" to the President. It is called that because Bundy began with this:

"But the other day at the swimming pool you asked me what I thought and here it is. We should now agree to send about one division when needed for military action inside Vietnam. I would not put in a division for morale purposes."
[Goldstein, p. 62]

Bundy then made an astonishing statement: "Laos was never really ours after 1954. South Vietnam is and wants to be." [Ibid.] He continued that most everyone else, including Johnson, wanted to insert ground troops.

Therefore, Kennedy's reluctance puzzled Bundy: "I am troubled by your most natural desire to act on other items now, without taking the troop decision. Whatever the reasons, this has now become a sort of touchstone of our will."
[Ibid., p. 63]

There is little doubt that this memo convinced Kennedy that he had to go around Bundy to accomplish his goal of withdrawing from Vietnam and he did until his life and his presidency were cut short in Dallas.

Johnson's Excuse

Though missing in Halberstam's book, it also appears that the Pleiku attack was simply an excuse for Bundy to freshen up what he and Johnson already wanted to do.

Bundy had sent a rough draft of his memo to Johnson on the second day of his February 1965 trip. Yet, the attack on Pleiku occurred on the fourth and last day. [Logevall, p. 320]

When Bundy got back to Washington, Johnson had his memo in hand. "Well, isn't that all decided?" Johnson said, looking up from his bed at his National Security Advisor. [Goldstein, p. 158]

Goldstein then adds something important that Halberstam completely misses. Johnson recalled all copies of Bundy's Pleiku report and told Bundy to deny its existence. [Ibid.]

Why? Because what Bundy proposed was an air campaign and Johnson doubted that more aerial bombing would be decisive. As Goldstein writes, Johnson used to say that "Ol' Ho isn't gonna give in to any airplanes." [Goldstein, p. 159]

Johnson, however, also had to confront opposition to ground troops from U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Maxwell Taylor. [Ibid.]

So, Johnson finessed this dilemma by launching the bombing campaign in February, expecting two results: First, the air campaign would prove ineffective, and second, the theater commander, Gen. William Westmoreland, would request ground troops for air base security.

This is exactly what happened. Amid great fanfare, the first American ground troops arrived at Da Nang air base in March, to be followed by hundreds of thousands more.

It had taken eight months from the Tonkin Gulf incident to the start of a full-scale war.

After Da Nang, the insertion of more combat troops came with amazing speed. Three weeks later, Westmoreland requested 20,000 more men with the mission altered from base protection to offensive operations.

Westmoreland then asked for 82,000 more men. By the end of 1965, one year after LBJ's election, there were 175,000 combat troops in country. Under Kennedy there were none.

Cold Warrior

McGeorge Bundy later explained that Johnson, a Cold Warrior and a believer in the Domino Theory, genuinely thought it was crucial to guard South Vietnam for the greater security of Southeast Asia.

There is another key part of Johnson's escalation that Halberstam leaves out: former President Dwight Eisenhower's support. [Goldstein p. 161]

Ike informed Johnson that "he would use any weapons required, adding that if we were to use tactical nuclear weapons, such use would not in itself add to the chance of escalation." [Ibid.]

Johnson felt that with Eisenhower behind him, the dissidents were harmless. And further, Eisenhower supported Westmoreland's recommendations from the field.

Because Eisenhower was another believer in the Domino Theory, LBJ considered Ike his most important single political ally. [Ibid., p. 162] This was an important part of Johnson's psychology as he went to war.

However, to highlight Eisenhower's role would have undermined Halberstam's thesis, that the Vietnam War should be blamed on Democratic intellectuals brought to Washington by Kennedy. So, Eisenhower also disappears from the picture.

There is another key point that Halberstam leaves out – that 1965 was only the

beginning. Because Johnson believed a land war was the only route to victory, he granted the Pentagon each troop request.

And as the number began to soar way beyond 175,000, the exodus of former Kennedy staffers began in earnest: McCone, Bundy, Ball and McNamara. Rather than Halberstam's take that Johnson was in awe of these can-do intellectuals LBJ found them entirely expendable.

As Logevall writes and contrary to what Halberstam postulates Johnson was not at all intimidated by Bundy, McNamara and certainly not his pal Rusk. He usually overrode them or ignored them.

For example, Bundy wanted Johnson to be more candid with the public about the true circumstances of the war, but Johnson refused.

After 1965, as LBJ continued to commit tens of thousands of additional combat troops, it became clear that he was not listening to his Cabinet. Instead, the meetings were pro forma in part because Westmoreland had a secret telegram channel to LBJ. [Goldstein, pgs 214-15]

It was through this channel that Westmoreland would make a request, Johnson would grant it, and *then* he would call a meeting to discuss it, all designed to give his advisers the illusion of being heard when they really were not.

And this is a key reason why they left one by one.

McCarthy Fears

One of the main motifs of *The Best and the Brightest* is that the collapse of China in 1949 scarred U.S. diplomats and many politicians to such a degree that they could not risk losing another Far East country.

And the fact that the "loss" of China occurred under President Harry Truman made it a special problem for the Democratic Party. There is little doubt that this was the case for President Johnson. [See Logevall pgs. 76-77]

But try and find a quote along these lines from President Kennedy. Having read several books on the specific subject of Kennedy and Vietnam, I cannot recall JFK relating Vietnam to the fall of China.

But you can find a slew of quotes reflecting Johnson's dread over getting blamed for Vietnam the way officials in the Truman administration were castigated over China.

For example, Johnson told a newspaper reporter that withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam would start the dominoes falling.

“And God Almighty, what they said about us leaving China would just be warming up compared to what they’d say now,” LBJ said. [James Blight, *Virtual JFK*, p. 211]

In Doris Kearns’s book, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, he is even quoted comparing withdrawal from Vietnam to what British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain did in appeasing Adolf Hitler at Munich.

“And I knew that if we let Communist aggression succeed in taking over South Vietnam, there would follow in this country a national debate that would shatter my presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy,” Johnson said.

Johnson envisioned something like a repeat of the “who-lost-China” blame game of the McCarthy era or even worse.

Though fully aware of this recent history, Kennedy resisted such fears, which may mark the sharpest dividing line between how Kennedy approached Vietnam and how Johnson did.

As shown by JFK’s positions on French colonialism in Algeria and Western interference in the Congo, Kennedy understood the appeal of Third World nationalism.

By contrast, Johnson feared that any sign of Democratic weakness in foreign policy might reignite the embers of McCarthyism that still smoldered on the Right and thus consume Johnson’s cherished social and domestic agenda.

As a Texan, Johnson also favored cowboy rhetoric and disdained what he viewed as Kennedy’s hesitancy to use force.

Halberstam glides over a key example of Johnson’s macho tone. In 1965, LBJ dispatched U.S. troops to the Dominican Republic to thwart a leftist rebellion against a military junta that had displaced liberal Juan Bosch.

Johnson threatened the rebel leader thusly, “Tell that son of a bitch that unlike the young man who came before me, I am not afraid to use what’s on my hip.” [Halberstam, p. 531]

Though noting this stark comment, Halberstam draws no broader conclusion from Johnson’s personal declaration that he was far readier to resort to military violence than his predecessor was.

The quote is significant, too, because Kennedy *did intercede* in the Dominican Republic, although through diplomatic means and economic sanctions in support of Bosch. [Donald Gibson, *Battling Wall Street*, pgs. 78-79]

By contrast, Johnson sent troops in to back the military junta that Kennedy was against, thereby reversing his policy.

In other words, Kennedy was far more inclined than Johnson to seek peaceful solutions to crises, while Johnson lived in fear that the Republicans and the Right would launch another McCarthy era if Johnson didn't play the tough guy.

However, to acknowledge that point, which is implicit in Johnson's own words about the Dominican Republic, would destroy Halberstam's thesis that the course to war in Vietnam was charted by Kennedy and his best and brightest who then arrogantly pulled Johnson along en route to disaster.

Johnson's Defeat

At the end of the book, Halberstam writes that after just narrowly surviving a challenge from Sen. Gene McCarthy in the New Hampshire primary in 1968, Johnson learned that he would do even worse in Wisconsin and decided to withdraw from the race. [Halberstam p. 654]

The author then winds up his book by describing how Vietnam also devastated the careers of the key Kennedy men, the likes of Max Taylor, Bob McNamara and McGeorge Bundy.

What Halberstam doesn't say is that the truly devastating moment came when Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963, and the prospects for an early U.S. exit from Vietnam died with the young president.

That was what Taylor, McNamara and Bundy all said later, that Kennedy would not have committed combat troops to Vietnam. But that recognition would have been personally disastrous for Halberstam.

The Best and the Brightest, which wowed nearly all the big-name book critics and sold some 1.8 million copies, would have required at minimum a full-scale re-write and possibly an unceremonious spot at the bottom of a circular file.

In one of the very few critical reviews – in January 1973 for the *New York Review of Books* – Mary McCarthy saw through the fog of Halberstam's thesis regarding the war.

She wrote that he had gotten it wrong about how Kennedy's too-clever-by-half advisers the East Coast elitism of the Bundy brothers, combined with the whiz kid can-do mentality of McNamara had somehow produced the debacle of Vietnam.

The declassified record, both what was available in the early 1970s when Halberstam was completing his book and what has been released more recently, further undercuts his thesis.

The documents show that Kennedy understood McGeorge Bundy was too hawkish on Vietnam and decided to go around him. Kennedy also handed to McNamara the assignment of implementing a full-scale American withdrawal.

Only after Kennedy was killed did his successor, Johnson, stop these plans and turn to hawks like Walt Rostow and Bill Bundy.

By eliminating the presidential primacy of Kennedy and Johnson, Halberstam creates a policy continuum on Vietnam that assumes that subordinates run the show.

It's a bit like saying that White House aide Oliver North directed the Iran-Contra enterprise without the knowledge and support of President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George H.W. Bush in the 1980s.

That was the Iran-Contra cover story, of course. And what Halberstam does in *The Best and the Brightest* is essentially a cover story, too.

But the book is not just a distortion of how the Vietnam War occurred, blaming it largely on some smarty-pants JFK appointees. It also covers up the more troubling fact that the U.S. policy establishment is prone to catastrophic mistakes because of its structure.

The fact is that there were people who understood the complexities and dangers of going to war in Vietnam, but they were largely ignored. More precisely, they were systematically ignored.

If you persisted in telling hard truths in establishment circles, your career would be sidetracked.

There was a selection process that got rid of those who got in the way of the billions of dollars made on adventures like the Vietnam War.

Though he sometimes engaged in Cold War rhetoric, President Kennedy was an exception to this pattern, especially regarding Vietnam. Since he had been there as early as 1951 and understood the anti-colonial nationalism that was driving the conflict, he wanted to get out.

Halberstam's book covers up this fact: that while the powers-that-be are indeed often overrated, Kennedy was not one of them. That was a truth too radical for someone like Halberstam, who was never the kind of writer who pushed the envelope.

Yet, what makes his iconic book even a worse travesty is that he never tried to amend it, even after more declassified documents revealed that Kennedy was intent on withdrawing and that Johnson reversed that policy. That failure, I

think, speaks to Halberstam's intent.

In my view, Halberstam's deception was purposeful. Therefore, this is not just an obsolete book. It is an intentionally misleading one.

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Spain's Tahrir Square

Angered by "free-market" policies that have created high unemployment and are now forcing government spending cuts, tens of thousands of Spaniards are occupying central squares in Madrid and other cities in a challenge to the country's economic elites, as Pablo Ouziel describes in this guest essay.

By Pablo Ouziel

May 19, 2011

Spain's people's movement has finally awoken. La Puerta del Sol in Madrid is now the country's Tahrir Square, and the "Arab Spring" has been joined by what is now bracing to become a long "European Summer."

As people across the Arab world continue their popular struggle for justice, peace and democracy, Spain's disillusioned citizens have finally caught on with full force.

Slow at first, hopeful that Spain's dire economic conditions would magically correct themselves, the Spanish street has finally understood that democratic and economic justice and peace will not come from the pulpits of the country's corrupt political elite.

Amidst local and regional election campaigns, with the banners of the different political parties plastered across the country's streets, people are saying "enough!"

Disillusioned youth, the unemployed, pensioners, students, immigrants and other disenfranchised groups have emulated their brothers and sisters in the Arab world and are now demanding a voice demanding an opportunity to live with dignity.

As the country continues to sink economically with unemployment growing incessantly one in two young people is unemployed across many of the country's regions.

With many in the crumbling middle class on the verge of losing their homes while bankers profit from their loss and the government uses citizen taxes to expand the military-industrial complex by going off to war; the people have grasped that they only have each other if they are to rise from the debris of the militarized political and economic nightmare in which they have found themselves.

Spain is finally re-embracing its radical past, its popular movements, its anarcho-syndicalist traditions and its republican dreams.

Crushed by Generalissimo Francisco Franco 70 years ago, that Spanish popular culture seemed like it would never recover from the void left by a right-wing dictatorship, which exterminated many of the country's dissenting voices.

But the protests of the 15th of May 2011 were a reminder to those in power that Spanish direct democracy is still alive and has finally awoken.

In the 1970s a transition through pact, transformed Spain's totalitarian structures into a representative democracy in which all the economic structures remained intact.

For the highly illiterate generations of the time, marred in the reality of a poverty-stricken country, the concessions made by the country's elite seemed something worth celebrating.

Nevertheless, as the decades passed, the state-owned corporations were privatized robbing the nation of its collective wealth, and the political scene crystallized into a pseudo-democracy in which two large parties PP and PSOE marginalized truly democratic alternatives.

As this neoliberal political project advanced, the discontent began to resurface, but the fear-mongers, including many of Spain's baby-boomers who had once fought for democracy, were quick to remind the youth of the dangers of rebellion.

For many decades in Spain, the mantra was, "it is better to live as we are than to go back to the totalitarianism of the past, and if you shake the system too much, it will take away our hard-earned rights."

So the youth mostly remained silent, fearful of what could happen if they spoke out.

Through the prism of this generational divide, some contented baby-boomers blamed the youth and their supposed unwillingness to work hard for bringing the country to its knees.

But the youth have stopped this blame game, recognizing the true risks to their own future and finally encouraging the whole country to mobilize for a better future.

The economic and political project of Spain's elite has destroyed the economic dreams of whole generations of naive and apathetic Spaniards; it has left the country in the hands of bond speculators and central bankers, and Spaniards will have to pay that price.

Across the continent, Spaniards look out at a failed European project, with its borders quickly being reinstated, a collapsing Euro currency, and the examples of Greece, Portugal and Ireland as stark reminders to those on the streets what they are fighting to disassociate themselves from.

What has begun in Madrid's Puerta del Sol and has been echoed in 52 cities across the country is the crystallization of a popular movement for freedom, which has no intention of fading away.

The people have no choice. Either they take city squares as symbols of their struggle, or their message is never heard.

The government knows this and that is why it has quickly responded by trying to disperse the crowds with its repressive police force, but following some arrests, the people are back with more strength.

A silent revolution has begun in Spain, a nonviolent revolution which seeks democracy through democratic means, justice through just means, and peace through peaceful means.

This struggle has finally captivated the imagination of the Spanish people, and many young Spaniards believe there is no turning back. The challenge ahead will be in keeping the collective spirit nonviolent as the police force does everything in its power to destroy the movement.

The popular movement also must be alert to bond speculators who will threaten the country with economic sanctions in order to scare the population into submission.

A constructive program also will be needed to articulate sustainable alternatives for a different Spain.

A steering committee must emerge from the crowds with the capability of making

clear and viable demands that grab the imagination of the country and force the political elite to comply.

These are delicate times in Spain. If this spontaneous nonviolent movement succeeds, Spain may welcome a brighter future. If it fails, violence may become the only option for those in pain.

Pablo Ouziel's articles and essays are available at pabloouziel.com
