

David Halberstam Tells Stories About Important People

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The *Powers That Be* is the transcript of a talkfest. One must imagine the raconteur among friends: The dinner was excellent, the drinks are plentiful, and the audience is sympathetic, eager to enjoy and to believe. Best of all, the storyteller has stories to tell. As he explains, he has spent five years cozing with the great and the near-the-great, mining stories comic and sad, racy and droll, but all touched by certified celebrity and therefore worthy of attention. Covering forty years of the movers and shakers, and the moved and shaken, in the communications media, the transcript is not unlike 770 close-printed pages of *People* magazine. Pseudo-sophisticates who think themselves above that sort of thing ignore the fact that Halberstam's gossip is in the service of a very solemn thesis. That thesis, repeated frequently lest the drowsy miss it, is that the media, especially television, have revolutionized American politics and society. Indeed they have taken over.

Gossip harnessed to high purpose is more than gossip. Insight transforms chatter into commentary. Halberstam is not content to entertain; he aims to instruct. By the detritus of trivia about the famous he skillfully holds the learner's attention so that he can, from time to time, slip in a lesson of socially redeeming merit. Thus, for example: "The decade of the sixties was an explosive time, the old order was being challenged and changed in every sense, racially, morally, culturally, spiritually, and it was a rich time for journalists." It is the kind of wisdom without which, as Halberstam might say, it would be impossible to understand our unprecedented, rapidly changing, revolutionary world.

Those who dismissively talk of gossip do not understand the uniqueness of journalists and politicians, the two groups that claim one another's excited attentions. Assiduously to explore every detail about them is not curiosity but the citizen's moral duty; it is required by the public interest. The same treatment applied to movie stars and their ilk is, of course, trashy and fit only for the consumption of the lower orders. Applied

to people engaged in other professions and enterprises, the treatment would be unseemly, unnecessary, and even dull. The listener who does not understand that every significant question in life is political and journalistic is not ready for the Halberstam tapes.

Politics, Halberstam intriguingly suggests, has to do with power. With *Power*, that is. It is the special kind of Power possessed by the higher orders and those who succeed in joining them. The narration is charged by a semi-religious awe toward The Great Ones. Referring to the *New York Times*, Gay Talese wrote of *The Power and the Glory*. *The Powers That Be* was preceded, of course, by Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*. It is a genre that found classic form in the early Norman Podhoretz's *Making It*. One courts the favor of the bitch goddess Success by exposing her bitchiness. Since she is a goddess of perverse taste, it works. But only the churlish would draw the conclusion that the genre is therefore self-serving. To the contrary. How could someone like Halberstam believably indict the seductions of Power in the lives of evil people such as Joe McCarthy, Spiro Agnew, and, above all!, Richard Nixon, if he himself had not taken the risk of climbing into those higher orders so imperiled by Power. He has earned the right to talk so often and at such length about the integrity, courage, and assorted virtues that are manifest in the journalistic profession. In the best journalistic tradition he boldly cultivates the corrupted in order to reveal their folly and warn us from their ways. In addition, by talking so extravagantly about the virtues of journalists—virtues that he himself exemplifies—he runs the additional risk of offending against the modesty of peers (including reviewers) who, as he makes clear, want no reward other than to discover The Truth.

As good raconteurs do, Halberstam, in addition to lacing his stories with morals to be learned, also arranges them in an order, although a very fluid order. In agreeable company, tales at table are permitted to ramble. Most of the stories are about people in "the kingdom of the media." Henry Luce, Bill Paley, Walter Cronkite, Otis Chandler, Dan Rather, Kay Gra-

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ham, Teddy White, Punch Sulzberger, people like that. And of course the stories are about the politicians whom journalists raise up and cast down in the course of monitoring the public arena on our behalf. Halberstam generally arranges his people according to their institutional affiliation, and the narration shuttles between story clusters at *Time* magazine, CBS, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and, less frequently, the *New York Times*.

Many of the stories have been told many times before. The skilled storyteller knows that his listeners do not delight in surprise or new information so much as the languid revisiting of familiar terrain. Halberstam's tour of famous battlefields, along with his depictions of the bad guys and good guys as his audience remembers them, is a relief from the imperious contemporaneity of so much journalism. There is nothing here about the last several years (Jimmy Carter is mentioned once in passing), thus giving Halberstam a chance to deal thoroughly with, for instance, the turn-of-the-century economy of Southern California, upon which the Chandlers built their *Times* empire. Thus too Theodore White's early years in China can be given a fulsome twenty pages—interesting material that might have been turned into a book, if Mr. White had not already done it, a couple of times. Without such a leisurely pace it surely would have been impossible to devote several pages to the details of how Bill Paley in 1929 persuaded the American Tobacco Company to sponsor a fifteen-minute program of martial music on CBS (the company chairman loved the sound of “oom Pah—oom Pah” and thought everyone else would too). In this way, while discoursing on the familiar, Halberstam subtly introduces information that we probably didn't know or even care about before.

The publisher reportedly gave Halberstam an advance of \$300,000. For their money they have received not only vintage anecdotes of twentieth-century political history but also a powerful thesis that will surely arrest the attention of thoughtful citizens. That thesis, as noted earlier, is that the media, particularly television, have had an enormous impact on American life. In support of his argument Halberstam cites Lyndon B. Johnson. “You guys,” Johnson declared in a moment of pique, “all you guys in the media. All of politics has changed because of you.” But Halberstam's premier authority is Richard Nixon, especially his notorious news conference following his 1962 defeat in the California governor's race. It is noteworthy that Halberstam has little use for people like Lyndon Johnson and Richard (“phony,” “corrupt,” “pitiable”) Nixon. It is therefore the more remarkable that these men who were wrong about almost everything were consistently right about one thing—the awesome determination and power of journalists.

Thus, because he controlled *Time*, Henry Luce was “as influential as the Secretary of State.” The Nationalist Chinese thought Luce “the most important man in the United States,” and Halberstam does not dissent. It was “not by chance” that FDR was reelected three times. He understood the power of the media.

It might be objected that, contra Halberstam, just because *Time* or the *New York Times* supported something their support did not make that something happen. But such an objection fails to grasp the fact that history is determined “not by chance” but by the designs and ambitions of “the powers that be.” “It is no accident,” as the Marxists say, except Halberstam makes clear that the explanation is not class conflict but media impact. The influence of a Bill Paley can hardly be underestimated. “He made the American home the focal point of the American marketplace.” Not the Sears Roebuck catalogue nor the earlier peddler nor the fact that people at home have always thought about buying things for the home, but CBS's fifteen minutes of martial music turned the home into a marketplace.

Or consider again the impact of Luce: “His greatest influence may have been in broadening American culture, in involving millions of middlebrow Americans in the arts, in theater, in religion and education.” It is sobering to ponder the prospect of those ignorant and irreligious millions, had it not been for the influence of *Time*. The media have assumed ontological powers, determining whether a person or event will be or not be. An opponent of Nixon, seeing him on TV, wanted the picture removed. “He poked around with the dials until he made Richard Nixon a nonperson and finally only a voice emerged from a vast screen of snow.” Words and ideas are no match for the powerful screen of being and nonbeing. The priority of the picture in Halberstam's teaching comes through strongly and regularly. For example, “There was one issue of the Luce publications that probably had more impact on antiwar feeling than any other piece of print journalism.” It was the 1969 issue of *Life* that carried a section with no words at all, just pictures of all the Americans killed in Vietnam the previous week. Print journalism reaches its culmination in the elimination of words and the triumph of the picture.

Pedants will no doubt pick at “inaccuracies” in the transcript. They will decry the hyperbole in saying that Otis Chandler gained seventeen pounds in one night of celebration. Little do they understand the storyteller's art. By cleverly changing the program schedule, Halberstam tells us, Paley in 1931 succeeded in “silencing” the right-wing radio priest, Charles Coughlin. Of course Halberstam does not mention that five years later, in 1936, Coughlin's Union party got almost a million votes (compared with Socialist Norman Thomas's 188,000), or that Coughlin was later and effectively silenced by the action of the hierarchy. It is not as though Halberstam is writing history. He is telling stories about the power of the media.

Similarly, Halberstam describes one of his choice villains, *Time*'s Managing Editor Otto Fuerbringer, as “a conservative man, the son of a German Lutheran theologian, and his roots were in the conservative tradition of the Missouri synod of the Lutheran Church.” That explains why “he was never really a man of New York and in fact was deeply suspicious of

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the New York intellectual and journalistic worlds that influenced his colleagues so strongly.” In another kind of truth-telling it might be pointed out that in fact Otto Fuerbringer was very much a rebel against his cultural and religious background; indeed his disaffection from the faith was for years considered something of a scandal in sectors of Midwest Lutheranism. But Halberstam’s talk about Fuerbringer’s background is in the service of a different kind of truth, a truth that comes up in several other connections and relates to the odd and often dangerous ways of religiously serious Christians and how they conflict with Jewishness in “the kingdom of the media.” The intrusion of Christian commitment into that kingdom is, of course, a delicate subject, but, as we shall see, Halberstam handles it with finesse.

Pedants can also be counted upon to complain about “contradictions” in Halberstam’s stories. For example, there are many pages about how Philip Graham took over the *Washington Post* and turned a second-rate local paper into a national power that could determine presidential candidates and almost dictate major policies. Then, somewhat later, we have the multipaged story of Ben Bradlee, who took over the *Washington Post* and turned a second-rate local paper into a national power that could do wondrous things, including the unmaking of a president. The literal-minded will protest that the story logically requires that, between Graham and Bradlee, the *Post* must have gone into a frightful decline in order for Bradlee to do the gigantic things that Graham had done years earlier. But that kind of quibbling ignores the nature of Halberstam’s task, to tell stories about the great deeds of the media’s monarchs.

In service to that purpose, the creative adjustment of facts must be seen as achievement rather than as fault. Similarly, in telling the story of how the media ended the war in Vietnam (a tale much cherished by the narrator’s company), Halberstam describes how the Tet offensive of 1968 was a great military defeat for America. No doubt Halberstam is familiar with the authoritative studies demonstrating that, in the sterile sense of historical fact, Tet was a great military defeat for Hanoi that was creatively reconstructed by the media. But he would be false to his own high purpose and his devotion to the revolutionary role of the media if he permitted himself to be confined by mere facticity.

Virtue is very much at the heart of Halberstam’s enterprise. Not, of course, the pale virtues of objectivity and crippling accuracy, but the lively virtues of knowing what the big story is about and who are the good guys and who the bad in the morality play of American media. The reporters

who covered Vietnam “came to the story remarkably clean, carrying no excess psychological or political baggage. What obsessed them was *the story*. They had no other motivation, no other distraction.” Again and again Halberstam helpfully reminds his hearers of the purity of the journalist’s craft. He quotes Fred Friendly’s pristine statement about the news analysts’ responsibility “to help the listener to understand, to weigh, and to judge, but not to do the judging for him.” Comments Halberstam, “A nice intelligent definition of journalistic responsibility; forty years later it could still make people very angry.” Lest we doubt that there are such angry people, Halberstam’s stories are chock-full of rogues who failed to revere the sanctity of the media’s motives or the legitimacy of their power. And, at least in this respect, things are getting better. Discussing the explicit media treatment of atrocities in Vietnam, Halberstam says, “Just twenty years earlier, editors at *Life* had been arguing whether or not they dared to print photos of the bodies of American Marines strewn on the beaches of Tarawa.” Censorship during World War II may have had something to do with the very different press coverage, but the point to be made is that journalists have become more courageous. For instance, in 1971 John Leonard of the *Times Book Review* published a long piece on war crimes in Vietnam. “It was a landmark piece of commentary, and it took uncommon courage for Leonard to print the review;...it was straying far from the accepted norm.” It is good to be reminded how daring it was in 1971 to criticize the war in Vietnam.

By way of contrast, consider the Christian missionary zealot, Henry Luce. Halberstam makes a convincing case that Luce was anti-Communist! “Russia was still an ally while he readied himself for the Cold War, much to the consternation of some of his correspondents who took a more moderate line.” Halberstam is too modest to explain how difficult it was for some of those correspondents to be moderate. In *The Great Fear*, the definitive leftist study of the McCarthy era, David Cate makes clear that many correspondents were members or sympathizers of the Communist party. It was not easy to take “a moderate line” when right-wingers like Luce were slandering the Stalinist future that worked. To the many other virtues attributed to the press must be added the virtue of restraint, a disciplined holding back that, in the case of many journalists, became more manifest as the McCarthy era advanced.

Halberstam’s fine discriminations regarding virtue are an added treat. For instance, he tells how, after Robert Kennedy’s assassination, Otis Chandler remarked, “I guess there’s no one who represents us any more.” When asked who he meant by “us,”

Chandler answered, "The black and the young and the poor." Halberstam will have none of this, pointing out that, whatever his liberal sympathies, Chandler was still very much a member of the aristocracy. Halberstam will not so easily admit others to the company of moral solidarity with the poor. Despite this fine moral discretion, however, Halberstam is frequently generous toward his principals, even risking repetition in order to give credit where credit is due. For example, within the short compass of two pages introducing Bill Paley we are told he was a "staggering success story," "genius," "towering figure," "the best," "tough and shrewd," "shrewd and imaginative," "had a marvelous ability," was "brilliant," and "absolutely brilliant." Thus even the not-so-brilliant listener is alerted to the fact that Bill Paley is an unusual person.

The same sensitivity is employed in making repeated but nuanced points about the Jewish factor in the kingdom of the media. Of course Spiro Agnew also broached this topic, but we know that his intentions were malicious. Halberstam's patent concern for the moral integrity of media that must not be "captive to the society" makes it easier for him to point up the dangers to journalism posed by serious Christians. We have already mentioned the cases of Otto Fuerbringer and Luce. References to Luce's Calvinism help explain his peculiar behavior, such as his excessive desire to achieve. Paley's father bought his son into the kingdom, Philip Graham married into it, Chandler and Sulzberger inherited their slices of it, but Luce, that driven son of Calvin, created his power from scratch. It is as though by his perverse virtue he would mock the ways of The Powers That Be. Halberstam is understandably troubled by this behavior and attributes it to Luce's being the child of missionaries. He notes that John Hersey and Pearl Buck were also children of missionaries, but they largely overcame the handicap. It is not that all the conservative bad guys are Christian. Henry Grunwald of *Time* "was a conservative man in a far more classic sense than Fuerbringer." "He was a man of conservative instincts but not of conservative certitudes." He was "a man nourished by the New York intellectual world" and therefore "intellectually very open." Grunwald is Jewish, of course, and his is one of several cases in which Halberstam spies a latent anti-Semitism at work in holding a hero back from the promotions he deserves.

The Jewish-Christian dialectic is brilliantly depicted in Halberstam's story about Woodward and Bernstein, the *Post* reporters of Watergate fame. Woodward came from a Midwestern Protestant fundamentalist background ("the heartland of America," Halberstam dubs it). Halberstam explains, with amused tolerance, how Woodward saved himself by resisting pressures to "get saved." Thus Halberstam himself so well exemplifies that virtue of tolerance characteristic of the open-minded New York intellectuals, ever ready to forgive others where they came from. He shows how it is possible for someone like Woodward to fit in (he was "filled with quiet Midwestern chutzpah"). As a boy, Woodward was

asked if things had changed in his life after he accepted Christ. Halberstam says, "At eight Robert Woodward was not very good at dissembling and he would answer that they had not changed very much." Clearly, Woodward would fit in. Bernstein, on the other hand, was the countercultural son of Jewish socialists who had paid their radical dues way back in the Thirties. And so the ethnic factors made them a good team: "If Woodward was serious and hard-working, then Bernstein was more imaginative, more creative." In this connection too Halberstam demonstrates a bold defiance of the stereotypes that plague lesser minds.

It should not be thought that Halberstam has a bias against Christianity or religion in general. It is simply that, as he mentions several times in passing, the media revolution has made television more important than religion in the lives of ordinary Americans. Religion is a residual phenomenon that is probably unobjectionable in its place, but its place is certainly not anywhere near The Powers That Be. What and Who are shaping American society can be understood without reference to religion. Almost. In the near eight hundred pages of transcript there is one paragraph on religion. Philip Graham of the *Post* became quite interested in religion for a time. In desperation, just before he committed suicide. Aside from occasional outbursts of existential despair and missionary zealotry, the kingdom of the media is religion-free.

Finally, the good storyteller knows how to employ the riddle and elliptical saying, leaving his listeners with something to ponder after the story is finished. Here too Halberstam is a master. Examples abound, but a few will make the point. When World War II was over, Edward R. Murrow "was in his own way as much a hero and a personage of that epic era as Eisenhower himself." The key words are "in his own way." The riddle is, Who wasn't? Or, speaking of Luce again: "Perhaps only Walter Lippmann in a different way was as important a figure of the same era." It doesn't say what it seems to say. Halberstam has a towering talent for such posers. He is censorious toward Walter Cronkite for not opposing the Vietnam war early enough to gain moral credits. And, when Cronkite did come out against the war, he opposed, "not the morality of it, but the disproportion of it." If not because the costs are disproportionate to the gains, why would a particular war be immoral? These are the kinds of tantalizing questions Halberstam leaves his listeners to brood about long after story time is over.

This review of David Halberstam's achievement may seem excessively uncritical. I have already mentioned some of the criticisms that less enthusiastic reviewers might raise. But I am persuaded that such criticisms arise from the effort to sustain the out-dated distinction between the media and the American reality, a distinction that, as Halberstam makes manifestly clear, is no longer possible. In short, every imaginable criticism of *The Powers That Be* can be attributed to mistaking it for a book of serious social criticism or history—or, for that matter, mistaking it for a book.