

BOOKS

[*The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, David Halberstam, Hyperion, 736 pages]

Recalling the Forgotten War

By Walter M. Hudson

THE FIRST YEAR of the Korean War, so terrible and so filled with shattering human error, is the subject of David Halberstam's last book, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War*, finished just days before his death in a car crash last April. After that first year of war was over, the great campaigns essentially ended, and the conflict bogged down into World War I-style battles, dragging on painfully for two more years. It was, as Halberstam writes, a war that was puzzling, gray, and distant—seemingly “without hope or resolution.”

Unimportant, however, it was not. And the first year was the most crucial of all—from the summer of 1950, when North Korean T-34 tanks roared across the 38th parallel and sent South Korean and American forces into disarray, to the late spring of 1951, when Douglas MacArthur was relieved of command and returned to a tumultuous homecoming in the United States. It was a year as dramatic and dizzying as any in 20th-century American history: a summer of seemingly unstoppable Communist advance with American and Korean forces desperately falling back and clinging to the Pusan Perimeter; an autumn of triumph with the spectacular turnabout at Inchon, the North Korean army crushed and the United Nations forces hurtling toward the Manchurian border; a winter of overwhelming Chinese counterattack and, again, ignominious American retreat and defeat; and finally, a spring with a climactic show-

down between Commander in Chief Truman and Supreme Far East Commander MacArthur with both the Korean War and Cold War coming into the Main Streets and living rooms of America.

In New Journalist style, of the kind Halberstam used so masterfully in his greatest book, *The Best and the Brightest*, *The Coldest Winter* begins in October 1950, *in medias res*, as it were, with the Eighth Regiment of the U.S. First Cavalry Division at Unsan, north of Pyongyang. MacArthur had landed at Inchon the month before, routed and effectively knocked North Korea's army out of action, and was, with permission from Washington, rushing toward the Yalu with the goal of unifying all of Korea.

Americans at home were elated—assured of total victory—supplies were already being rerouted to Europe, and there was much talk about the boys being home for Christmas. But the soldiers themselves were wary. They were in unknown, harsh country, and rumors and fragmentary intelligence indicated that huge Chinese armies were hidden in the mountainous terrain. At Unsan, a small part of those forces struck, and the Eighth Regiment was badly mauled and nearly overrun. Eight hundred of the 2,400 men in the regiment were casualties.

But what makes the story even more incredible is what happened after Unsan. The Chinese attacked, then vanished once more. A more obvious warning could not have been made: hundreds of thousands of Chinese had already crossed over the Yalu River and were poised to strike the overconfident, overextended UN. But despite all the warnings, despite the growing obviousness of disaster, the United Nations forces kept on going, moving their strung-out units toward the Chinese border, daring Mao and tempting fate—a bet, as Halberstam notes, not a strategy. Indeed, he calls it a kind of “madness,” but not all blame can be put on MacArthur. It was a collective irrationality, the weakness of many men of power

that allowed this to happen, that plunged the United States into military disaster and the subsequent Truman-MacArthur feud, the closest thing to a military-political crisis America has had since the Civil War. It was an example, after all, of human choice and agency, not impersonal forces.

Halberstam has taught us before, wisely and well. *The Best and the Brightest* was a ferocious demolition of Kennedy's New Frontiersmen. The Whiz Kids, the “Harvards,” were, as he finally called McNamara, fools. Halberstam laid them bare: trapped by the crisis psychology of the Cold War—but more importantly, by their own egos and weaknesses—these apparently high-minded men (liberals virtually all) steadily, consciously, willingly immersed America in the Vietnam debacle.

Older, wiser, less impassioned in *The Coldest Winter*, Halberstam does not quite as ruthlessly flay the men who led American politics and arms in 1950-51. Less language like “brainwashing” and “lies” here: one gets the feeling that even the weakest and most foolish men in this book are somehow better, more open and outright even in their flaws than the dissembling intellectuals of Camelot. The message in Halberstam's last book is the same: character is still destiny, even when events seemingly ride mankind.

And what character studies Halberstam gives us in *The Coldest Winter*, page after page of them: whole subchapters devoted to MacArthur's father and mother (appropriate for a man of such Shakespearian complexity); telling episodes of Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee's youthful days, revealing the origins of resentment pent up for years; scathing passages about the pettiness and bigotry of even lesser figures, such as Edward (Ned) Almond, one of MacArthur's corps commanders. Human agency, in weakness, is everywhere. But so is human fortitude and, ever so rarely, genius: Halberstam rightfully credits Gen. Walton Walker's dogged stand at the Pusan Perimeter in the late summer of 1950, MacArthur's imagination and

daring in conceiving and executing Inchon, and Gen. Matthew Ridgway's adamantine will in turning the tide in 1951 and stopping the Chinese counteroffensive.

And what portrayals of the American soldiers in the foxholes, enduring, killing, and dying through it all. (Americanocentric, admittedly, it is; the Korean soldiers and people in the book are largely ciphers.) What Halberstam left out of *The Best and the Brightest*, for all its magnificent fury, were the consequences of the machinations of the McNamaras, Bundys, and Rostows. But he presents here military history at the spear point: the terrible confusion during the retreat to Pusan, the whirlwind victory at Inchon, and the terrible ordeal of the winter of '50 and '51.

We meet men such as Bruce Ritter, who in the agonizing retreat after the Chinese counterattack, carried away a dying man—even though it was hopeless

and knowing that he would probably die doing so—because it was the right thing to do. And throughout the book there are fantastic, terrifying scenes of torch-lit waves of Chinese soldiers, of near and actual Thermopylaes with whole units being immolated, sometimes for terrible but understandable reasons and other times for the vanities and weaknesses of the men who led them.

It would be hard to understand, much less partially absolve, the leaders on high for their tragic mistakes, were it not for their human frailties. And again, Halberstam's approach is crucial: we may forget, for example, how physically worn down Douglas MacArthur was by then (as noted by many around him)—an old and sometimes forgetful man at 70; how even George Marshall, then secretary of defense and the one man who could have somehow averted the disaster at the Yalu, was also an old man, exhausted by wartime exertions and peacetime efforts and unable to muster the strength to protest forcefully.

This personalization of history no doubt annoys some academics who probably consider Halberstam only a slightly better, more thoughtful Bob Woodward. But in the diverse panorama of characters in his study, Halberstam shows us how subtle and tricky the Korean War in particular, and the Cold War in general, really was. Against the leftist historians, why yes, of course, Stalin knew of and approved of Kim Il Sung's invasion; yes, of course, Kim, coddled and bankrolled by the Soviets, felt that he owed Stalin and the USSR, as Halberstam puts it, "big time." Against the right-wing conspiratorialists, no, Stalin did not order or direct the invasion; no, there was no masterminding from a worldwide HQ in Moscow.

Indeed, the Korean War was a war more about basic human failings and less about the self-evident stupidities of Marxism than we knew. Both Kim and his counterpart Rhee were nationalists—and proud, resentful, ambitious, and egomaniacal. They wanted to unify the country under their respective

thumbs on their own terms. (Rhee probably would have invaded northward given half a chance.) And when conflict broke out fully in 1950, human failings magnified, and human errors, as they always do in wartime, abounded.

Again and again, we see men taking counsel of their fears. A moral paralysis gripped Washington throughout 1950-51: Truman's fear of calling the Korean War a "war" (and forever bequeathing us the Orwellian term "police action"), Washington's fear of challenging MacArthur, fear of relieving MacArthur, fear of (on the Democrat side) being seen as soft of Communism, fear of (on the Republican side) losing a chance to take back power from the Democrats in the upcoming elections. Even the reckless gambit to the Yalu was essentially a study in moral cowardice. Halberstam quotes Acheson, as the armies rushed ahead to disaster: "We sat around like paralyzed rabbits."

Thankfully, Halberstam only once draws historical analogies to Vietnam and Iraq. History may teach lessons, but they are lessons woven into the texture of life's experiences. Some comparisons are always necessary, but if too extensive, they are nearly always ham-fisted, and such analogies tend to turn history into a form of apologetics: we have our own beliefs and those historical examples are dragged out to help us justify them. What Halberstam does, more importantly, is to shed further light on what we increasingly are discovering about the Cold War: that someone like George Kennan was more right than his critics and that what drove much of what we thought was the Cold War was not so much ideological as basic geopolitics: the hubris of victory, the fear of humiliation, and the intoxication of power.

The Coldest Winter is indeed a companion, as Russell Baker notes in his afterword, to *The Best and the Brightest*, and a superb one at that. ■

Walter M. Hudson is currently working on a dissertation in Cold War-period U.S. military history. He has written for Military Review and The Latin Mass magazine.

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[*A War Like No Other: The Truth About China's Challenge to America*, Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O'Hanlon, John Wiley and Sons, 232 pages]

Taiwanese Linchpin

By Ted Galen Carpenter

IN RECENT YEARS, most writers who deal with U.S. policy toward China fall into two distinct camps: panda huggers and panda sluggers. Members of the first faction rave about the growing trade ties between China and the United States and assert with a confidence bordering on certainty that economic progress in China will soon lead to political liberalization and the eventual emergence of a full-blown democracy. The panda sluggers, by contrast, view China as a 21st-century version of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union—an odious totalitarian power that is fast becoming a strategic adversary and mortal threat to America.

Brookings Institution scholars Richard C. Bush and Michael E. O'Hanlon are refreshing exceptions to the tendency to view China in such extreme terms. In *A War Like No Other: The Truth About China's Challenge to America*, the analysts make a serious attempt to capture the complexities and nuances of Washington's crucial relationship with the rising economic giant and possible military competitor. They are clearly worried about some aspects of Beijing's behavior, yet they also conclude that China's rise as a great power is "much less destabilizing than Germany's or Japan's in the first half of the twentieth century."

Despite such balanced treatment, *A War Like No Other* is ultimately a disappointment. It could have—and should have—been so much more than it turned out to be.

For a book that purports to examine the overall challenge China poses to the United States, several topics get short shrift. For example, Beijing's role in cre-

ating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a strong security partnership linking China to Russia and various Central Asian countries, receives only two passing mentions. Yet the SCO has not only conducted joint military exercises, it has openly advocated excluding the influence of "outside powers" (i.e. the United States) from Central Asia.

Likewise, Beijing has been less than helpful in dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis. A fairly consistent pattern has emerged. The United States and its European allies keep pushing for stronger economic sanctions against Tehran, while China (together with Russia) opposes such coercive measures and works to dilute any sanctions that are ultimately imposed. China has been only marginally more helpful in dealing with North Korea. Yet the authors say relatively little about this behavior and what it portends for Beijing's role in the international system.

The mounting resource competition between China and the United States, especially over oil, also receives little analysis from Bush and O'Hanlon. This is strange, given the growing agitation in Washington over China's extensive ties to key oil producers from the Persian Gulf to Africa to Latin America. Even the oil-rich Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, the centerpiece of a massive territorial claim by Beijing, receive only brief mention, though the Spratlys could become a focal point of tension between the U.S. and China. In addition to their probable oil resources, the islands stand astride key sea lanes. To put it mildly, Washington is not inclined to recognize Beijing's bold claims to virtually the entire South China Sea, which would give China control over sea lanes that are crucial to Japan and other key American allies and clients in East Asia.

Even the treatment of the large and vibrant U.S.-China trade relationship is rather meager. In particular, China's emergence as the second largest holder of U.S. treasury debt—and probably the largest holder within the next three or four years—should have been the subject of more analysis. It will become

increasingly difficult for Washington to take a strong position on trade or strategic disputes with China when it means angering America's chief banker.

Despite its broad title, the bulk of *A War Like No Other* is really about whether the Taiwan issue could ultimately lead to a conflict between China and the United States. Perhaps this shouldn't be too surprising, since Richard Bush was once the head of the American Institute in Taiwan—Washington's *de facto* embassy in Taipei.

To their credit, Bush and O'Hanlon recognize that the volatile Taiwan issue is the one factor in the overall U.S.-China relationship that could ignite a full-scale war. Other areas of disagreement seem manageable, in their judgment: "Most hypothetical causes of war between the United States and China turn out, upon inspection, to have little or no basis. The two countries will not duke it out simply to settle the question of who will 'run the world' in the twenty-first century." They note correctly that China and the United States need each other for economic prosperity.

The Taiwan issue, though, is a dark cloud on the horizon. They argue, "Even if the chances of war between the United States and China are less than 25 percent—indeed, even if they are less than 10 percent—they are far from zero." Bush and O'Hanlon not only fret about the danger of armed conflict over Taiwan, they understand that a war is more likely to arise because of blunders and misunderstandings than any ruthless Chinese desire for conquest.

Even so, the authors actually underestimate the risk of a Sino-American war over Taiwan. Developments in both Taiwan and mainland China (some of which have occurred since publication of the book) are increasingly alarming. Although the extensive economic ties between China and Taiwan should induce prudent behavior on both sides, that has not done so—especially on the part of Taipei. Indeed, the sense of Taiwanese nationalism and a distinct, assertive Taiwanese identity has grown even as the economic linkages have expanded.