

“The 90’s Wars,” by Jane Perlez, *The New York Times Review of Books*, 30 September 2001

WAR IN A TIME OF PEACE: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals

David Halberstam. New York: Scribner

In "War in a Time of Peace," David Halberstam carves out an ambitious agenda: to describe how former President Bill Clinton and, to a lesser extent, the first President George Bush dealt with the foreign policy challenges of the 1990's. Halberstam's central thesis is damning. In an era when Americans were feeling fat and happy at home, he says, the United States at the zenith of its power was reluctant to commit itself abroad. Halberstam shrewdly writes that for Clinton, the brilliant politician with his finger always on the people's pulse, foreign policy was "an inconvenience, something that might pull him away from his primary job at hand – domestic issues, above all the economy."

It is almost 30 years since Halberstam demystified another foreign policy establishment in "The Best and the Brightest," explaining how the hubris of those men got the United States into the Vietnam War, the most bitter of conflicts. His latest work, a sprawling tapestry of exquisite bottom-up reporting and powerful vignettes, is conceived as a bookend to that earlier volume. Many of the people at the White House, State Department and Pentagon who dealt with Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti and finally Kosovo were personally touched one way or another by the Vietnam War, Halberstam explains. Some, like Clinton, avoided the draft. Others, like two of his major foreign policy spokesmen, Anthony Lake and Richard C. Holbrooke, were young diplomats in Saigon. Still others, like Colin L. Powell and Wesley K. Clark, served in the military. By the 1990's these were the people on top of the heap, conducting policy and mindful always of that earlier disaster. Still, Halberstam is smart enough to avoid concluding that the memory of Vietnam drove the major military decisions of the Clinton administration or, as it turned out in some cases, the nondecisions.

Halberstam's narrative opens with what many Americans considered the successful outcome of the Persian Gulf war. He points out that President Bush got little electoral bounce from that first high-tech, low-casualty victory, and that this was a lesson Clinton never forgot. Halberstam quickly moves on to Bosnia, a different kind of conflict. That war, he says, tested the United States' commitment to moral goals in its foreign policy rather than simply to considerations of national security. Bosnia, Halberstam writes, created a new political constituency in America, one "driven by a memory that connected these events to the atrocities of the Nazis and therefore demanded that other nations ask themselves what their larger purpose was."

Halberstam then proceeds to show that Washington preferred not to think about larger purposes, and that the new political constituency he describes lacked clout. In one chilling example, he recounts how Richard Johnson, the State Department desk officer for the Balkans in the spring of 1992, went to a special interagency briefing where he saw satellite pictures of Serbian artillery and anti-aircraft emplacements above Sarajevo. The briefing officer, who had been through the gulf war, expressed surprise at how brazen the gun positions were. When Johnson asked how difficult it would be to take them out, the answer was simple: a day and a half of American air attacks. Johnson, Halberstam reports, dutifully wrote a one-page memo to

a superior two ranks above him. He heard nothing. And when he finally did get a response, he was rapped on the knuckles for daring to send the memo on high, and for venturing into territory that belonged to the military.

Similarly, Halberstam says, the senior echelons of the State Department did not want to know about Serbian atrocities: the systematic execution of Muslim leaders, the detention of Muslim men in concentration camps, the wholesale rape of Muslim women. As Washington dithered over the definition of genocide, Slobodan Milosevic, the Serbian president, was allowed to proceed apace in a war that killed more than 200,000 people.

And it was not just the American government that didn't want to know. In a fitting digression on a subject he well understands from writing "The Powers That Be," his book on the media barons, Halberstam illustrates how the Clinton administration was abetted by the television networks in its hear-no-evil, see-no-evil foreign policy. Just as newspapers were exposing the Serbian atrocities, and an upstart (but not widely watched) television outfit, CNN, was covering them, experienced network war correspondents languished in their expensive European bureaus, unable to get pocket change from their superiors to travel to Bosnia. All this was of a piece with Clinton's recognition that the American people were not eager to know about the persecution of minorities abroad.

While the main foreign policy event of the book is the violent disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, Halberstam also covers Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti. Of these three, he is best on Somalia, appreciating that the idea of turning a swath of desert inhabited by proud warrior nomads into an emerging democracy with the help of American troops was a lost cause from the start. Ambassador Robert Oakley, dispatched to Somalia as a sort of proconsul by Bush during the famine and then on hand later for a clean-up operation under Clinton, knew from his Vietnam experience that "nation-building imposed in the third world at gunpoint" made no sense. Halberstam agrees. The main proponent for the democracy project in Somalia was Madeleine K. Albright, then the United States representative at the United Nations and one of the senior officials without Vietnam experience.

In his final chapters Halberstam turns to Kosovo, the immaculate air war conducted from altitudes of 15,000 feet. Here, he expands on one of his important themes: the military's aversion to intervening in smaller wars and ethnic conflicts that posed little threat to American power. Compounding the difficulties presented by the Pentagon was the fact that Clinton was ill at ease with his senior military officers, and they with him. Halberstam notes that Powell, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the first nine months of Clinton's tenure and the most resistant of military interventionists, intimidated the new president. (Did Powell play a subtle game with Clinton? Halberstam reports that it was Powell who gave Clinton "Balkan Ghosts," by Robert Kaplan, the book that Clinton often cited as a persuasive reason for not intervening in Bosnia.)

Halberstam skillfully covers the already well-reported clashes between Secretary of Defense William Cohen and the commander of NATO forces, General Clark, over the use of ground troops in Kosovo. But he underplays a result of not using those troops: that Milosevic was

emboldened to send some 40,000 Serbian forces into Kosovo for ethnic cleansing, leading to the expulsion of nearly a million Albanians.

Halberstam is never a strident writer, but he does tend to overwrite, sometimes to the point of repetition. And the purr of his narrative while describing bureaucratic disputes in Washington sometimes masks the devastating effects of those squabbles in the field. The insider gossip, obviously garnered from gold-plated sources (but not from Clinton, who even out of office declined to see him), is always entertaining. Picture Vernon Jordan, brought in by President-elect Clinton to sharpen up the 1992 transition, using locker room language to tell the ineffably polite Warren Christopher, who wants to be secretary of state but is too timid to ask, that he has one last chance to put his name forward. At the same time, Halberstam can be maddeningly generous. He tends to balance the motives and actions of people in power rather than daring to hold them accountable. He agrees, for example, with Albright's contention that she was never fully accepted by her peers in the Clinton administration because she was a woman. Who knows the truth, but surely there were other factors as well. And he tosses a big bouquet to Holbrooke (with whom he acknowledges in his notes a "warm friendship"), saying that after Holbrooke's stint as United Nations representative he "emerged as something of a star, and the role was becoming to him."

In a way, "War in a Time of Peace" will be an interesting test case for Americans. Over the past decade Americans were absorbed in themselves. Now that foreign affairs have come home to the United States in the most crushing of ways, are they ready to read an account of foreign policy and its makers by one of the most astute writers in the trade? If they want to learn from the past decade, they should. If they want to think seriously about the future, they must.

Looking Away, by Stephen Holmes, *London Review of Books*, 14 November 2002

- *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* by Samantha Power
Basic Books, 640 pp, £21.99, January 2002, ISBN 0 465 06150 8
- *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals* by David Halberstam
Bloomsbury, 540 pp, £20.00, April 2002, ISBN 0 7475 5946 5

Conceived and researched during the 1990s, these two books nevertheless make important contributions to our understanding of today's international turbulence and uncertainty. Taken together, they help unravel one of the deepest mysteries of American policy towards Iraq: namely, why dissent inside the US has been so tame and equivocal. Why have the keenest protests against Bush's strategically unnecessary unilateralism come from the internationalist wing of the Republican Party (Brent Scowcroft, James Baker) rather than from the Democrats or the Left? Samantha Power [*SF note: Who later worked during President Obama's first term, overseeing, among other things, US policy toward Libya as Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs on the National Security Council staff*] and David Halberstam did not set out to solve this riddle, but they have unintentionally provided an important part of the answer.

Power was motivated to study the history of disappointing US responses to genocide by her indignation at the Clinton Administration's belated reaction to mass killings in Bosnia, where she worked in the early 1990s as a young freelance reporter. She was understandably appalled by what happened after the carnage began in 1992: 'Despite unprecedented public outcry about foreign brutality, for the next three and a half years the United States, Europe and the United Nations stood by while some 200,000 Bosnians were killed.' The book's bitterly ironic title distils her feelings about this period of inaction. It was Warren Christopher [*SF note: Clinton's Secretary of State*] who called genocide 'a problem from hell', implying basically that butchery in the Balkans was a public relations fiasco for the Administration. Cynically or not, the West sat on its hands, refusing to undertake even relatively costless gestures, such as knocking out the emplacements around Sarajevo. This particular lapse reminds Power of the Allies' refusal to bomb the rail lines into Auschwitz during the Second World War. The analogy is meant to sting. The Western countries that did nothing between 1992 and 1995 were the same ones that, with great solemnity, had opened museums to memorialise the Holocaust and, of course, had repeatedly promised 'never again'.

To get some distance on the Bosnian catastrophe and to comprehend the dynamics underlying American non-intervention, Power decided to study the history of US responses to atrocities abroad. She returned from her historical quest with a tale of cowardice and mendacity, stretching from the massacre of the Armenians in 1915 to the slaughter of the Tutsi in 1994. Her basic theme is 'America's toleration of unspeakable atrocities, often committed in clear view'. It turned out that 'the United States had never in its history intervened to stop genocide and had in fact rarely even made a point of condemning it as it occurred'. She hammers home the premeditated nature of US policy with instructive studies of Washington's passivity in the face of mass murder in Rwanda, Cambodia and Iraq as well as Bosnia.

Here is a typical passage: 'The Rwandan genocide would prove to be the fastest, most efficient killing spree of the 20th century. In a hundred days, some 800,000 Tutsi and politically

moderate Hutu were murdered. The United States did almost nothing to try to stop it.' Not only were no US troops dispatched or UN reinforcements authorised: no high-level US Government meetings were held to discuss non-military options, such as jamming Hutu radio broadcasts. No public condemnations were uttered. And no attempt was made to expel the genocidal Government's representative from the Security Council, where Rwanda held a rotating seat at the time.

Endeavouring to remain hopeful even while detailing America's refusals to rescue foreign victims of mass slaughter, Power alleges that pessimism of the intellect comports easily with optimism of the will. But the historical picture she paints is dark almost to the point of misanthropy. Basically, one US Administration after another stood idly by, feigning ignorance and impotence, while preventable genocide occurred. She freely reports this finding even though it blunts her indictment of the Clinton Administration, whose reluctance to intervene militarily on humanitarian grounds comes across, in the end, as exactly what one would expect.

Not the US alone, we are also given to understand, but every powerful nation looks first to its economic and strategic interests, embarking on missions of mercy only rarely and unreliably. All responses to injustice are selective, and the principles of selection are invariably tainted with the partiality of power-wielders towards themselves and their friends. During the Cold War, for instance, the US eagerly dwelt on Soviet violations of human rights. Today, by contrast, the US plays down Moscow's behaviour in Chechnya, out of respect for the two countries' shared confrontation with Islamic terrorism. Power is not the first to discover it: but, in international affairs, the factual distinction between 'them' and 'us' overshadows the moral distinction between just and unjust.

Another example of this shameful but persistent pattern makes arresting reading today. George H.W. Bush's largesse towards Iraq outdid Ronald Reagan's, even after Saddam Hussein's murder of a hundred thousand Iraqi Kurds had been amply documented. The credits provided by Bush 'freed up currency for Hussein to fortify and modernise his more cherished military assets, including his stockpile of deadly chemicals'. In 1989-90, Bush Sr gave financial support to the vicious dictator in Baghdad not only in order to curry favour with American farmers, eager to peddle their crops abroad, but also because of Tehran: that is, because the US President assumed platitudinously that the enemies of his enemies were his friends.

Homicidal rulers are sometimes toppled, it is true, but rarely by good Samaritans. Power summarises her dispiriting conclusion this way: 'Unless another country acts for self-interested reasons, as was the case when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, or armed members of the victim group manage to fight back and win, as Tutsi rebels did in Rwanda in 1994, the perpetrators of genocide have usually retained power.' But what about the decision of the US and its allies to intervene belatedly in Bosnia and, more rapidly, in Kosovo? According to Power, these are simply the exceptions that prove the rule.

The eventual decision to intervene militarily to halt the Balkan atrocities was the product of a coincidence of factors very unlikely to be repeated. For one thing, might does not even listen to right unless the latter occupies a fashionable address in Washington DC. In this case, according to Power, the influential American Jewish lobby, galvanised by TV images of emaciated white

men behind barbed wire, set to work and put irresistible domestic pressure on the White House. Not universal morality but group politics cut the ice: 'Jewish survivors and organisations put aside Israel's feud with Muslims in the Middle East and were particularly forceful in their criticism of US idleness.' And the apparent reason why 'American Jewish leaders pressed for military action' was that 'the Bosnian war brought both a coincidence of European geography and imagery.' To emphasise the decisive role played by ethnic particularism, despite all talk of moral universalism, Power adds: 'one factor behind the creation of the UN war crimes tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was the coincidence of imagery between the Bosnian war and the Holocaust.'

Apparently, Clinton's desire not to appear weak also influenced the US's ultimate choice to intervene in the Balkans: 'This was the first time in the 20th century that allowing genocide came to feel politically costly for an American President.' NATO's dread of losing its *raison d'être* and Europe's anxieties about refugees combined with such domestic US factors to provide the necessary boost for a policy of humanitarian intervention. Such concerns gave the intervening states, or their leaders at the time, their own stake in military action. Moral conscience had been demanding intervention for several years. But only when political pressure built up simultaneously on several fronts did forcible intervention occur.

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Be this as it may, the proponents of humanitarian intervention, in the 1990s, were among multilateralism's least forgiving critics. Power writes in this spirit. Clinton embraced 'consultation', she tells us, whenever his Administration lacked a clear policy of its own. In that sense, too, multilateralism is a sign of weakness. When it comes to atrocities, she implies, the US should simply have told its allies what it was going to do. From the same perspective, she also comments unflatteringly on the Yugoslav war crimes tribunal. The tribunal was initially established, she correctly explains, in order to avoid taking military action. In emergency situations, more generally, legalism can prove as debilitating as multilateralism. Due process can get in the way of an adequate response to genocide. We need to move swiftly and flexibly against the worst international villains even if this means unleashing lethal force on the basis of hearsay testimony and circumstantial evidence: 'an authoritative diagnosis of genocide would be impossible to make during the Serb campaign of terror.' Indeed, pre-emptive deployment of troops on the basis of clues collected by operatives in the field might be the only way to stave off a Rwanda-style massacre. The very idea of a war against genocide probably implies a relaxed attitude towards *mens rea*: 'Proving intent to exterminate an entire people would usually be impossible until the bulk of the group had already been wiped out.' Careful observance of procedural niceties will impede any speedy response to an unfolding massacre.

Deference to public opinion is equally inappropriate, Power continues, especially when the electorate is self-absorbed, parochial and fixated on body-bags. One wonders if her lack of sympathy with the widely reported public aversion to military casualties might have anything to do with the infrequent human contact between human rights activists and the families of the grunts who would be asked to die to uphold vaguely worded international laws. In any case, she also suggests that chronically reticent military should be rolled over by morally attuned civilian leaders in order to confront wicked forces in the world. Faced with humanitarian atrocities in

distant lands, any American official or citizen who claims to see shades of grey or two sides of the story, or who claims not to know exactly what is happening in the interior of a distant country, is probably feigning ignorance to deflect calls for action and to get the US off the hook. Some of those who declare murderous situations inside closed societies to be indecipherable by distant foreign observers are simply liars, while others are accomplices to genocide. If Power does not say exactly this, she comes close.

Needless to say, the 1990s advocates of humanitarian intervention are marginal actors on today's political scene, with little or no influence on current policy. But that does not mean that their way of thinking has been without effect. They have, on the contrary, unwittingly muffled the voices of Bush's critics. This is the principal relevance of '*A Problem from Hell*' to contemporary political debates. Power helps us understand a neglected reason for the near paralysis of the American Left in the face of the pre-emptive and unilateralist turn in American foreign policy. The Democrats' embarrassingly weak grasp of the differences between al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein and their election-year fear of being branded unpatriotic are not the only pertinent factors. Having supported unilateralist intervention outside the UN framework during the 1990s, liberals and progressives are simply unable to make a credible case against Bush today.

Formulated differently, the 1990s advocates of humanitarian intervention have unintentionally bequeathed a risky legacy to George W. Bush. They have helped rescue from the ashes of Vietnam the ideal of America as a global policeman, undaunted by other countries' borders, defending civilisation against the forces of 'evil'. By denouncing the US primarily for *standing idly by* when atrocity abroad occurs, they have helped repopularise the idea of America as a potentially benign imperial power. They have breathed new life into old messianic fantasies. And they have suggested strongly that America is shirking its moral responsibility when it refuses to venture abroad in search of monsters to destroy. By focusing predominantly on grievous harms caused by American inaction, finally, they have obscured public memory of grievous harms caused by American action.

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The natural result of focusing on atrocities that the US did nothing to prevent is to nudge other forms of wrongdoing and miscalculation into the background. Above all, it helps the current Administration achieve one of its principal ideological goals – namely, to erase from public memory the chastening lesson of Vietnam. In a footnote, to be fair, Power recollects the US's own crimes at Mai Lai: 'Although not one villager fired on the US troops, the Americans burnt down all the houses, scalped or disembowelled villagers, and raped women and girls or, if they were pregnant, slashed open their stomachs.' But the overall effect of the book is to blur such memories, to obscure how the use of US military force abroad, perhaps admirable in its original purpose, sometimes mires America in local struggles that it cannot master, radically weakens the democratic oversight that a chronically parochial public can exercise over a secretive military operation, involves our own soldiers in savage acts, and undermines the country's capacity to deliver some modest help to distressed peoples elsewhere in the world.

If we are responsible for our incredulity, as Power claims, are we not also responsible for the credulity that our good intentions create in others? If human rights activists push an interventionist policy that cannot be politically sustained, what have they done? If the international community coaxes the Bosnian Muslims to sit unarmed in a 'safe area', but does not come through when Srebrenica turns into a shooting gallery, who is responsible for abandoning those in whom we have nurtured unrealistic dreams of rescue? Are we responsible when we awaken false expectations by earnest talk? Are human rights advocates responsible when they initiate a policy that they know cannot be sustained politically, given domestic indifference to foreign affairs and the paralysing array of political forces back home? Power mentions this problem, to be sure. In fact, she explains that, because the West had promised bombing, the Muslims of Srebrenica did not reclaim the tanks and anti-aircraft guns that they had turned over to the UN in 1993 as part of a demilitarisation agreement. But she does not draw out the implications of this appalling bait-and-switch story for her depiction of humanitarian intervention as a politically shaky but morally obligatory cause.

In a battle with 'evil', no means seem impermissible. In the midst of a humanitarian catastrophe, the downstream consequences of short-term strategies do not occupy the centre of attention. The ghastly sight of mutilated corpses disinterred from mass graves is psychologically incompatible with calculations about scarce resources, opportunity costs and trade-offs. That is what we mean by moral clarity. Max Weber called it the ethics of conscience. But a sickened heart does not necessarily exempt us from taking responsibility for what happens *after* we intervene. What if the side on whose behalf we bomb urban areas subsequently commits ethnic cleansing under our military protection? Even if it begins with moral clarity, humanitarian intervention may gutter into moral ambiguity once the interveners find themselves, as in Kosovo, on the side of ethnic cleansers or propping up an unseemly local 'elite' infested with gangsters and drug smugglers.

Putting an end to atrocities is a moral victory. But if the intervening force is incapable of keeping domestic support back home for the next phase, for reconstructing what it has shattered, the morality of its intervention is ephemeral at best. If political stability could be achieved by toppling a rotten dictator or if nations could be built at gunpoint, this problem would not be so pressing. Human rights cannot be reliably protected unless a locally sustained political authority is in place. But how well prepared is the United States for rebuilding a domestically supported political system in, say, Iraq, where a multi-ethnic society has, so far, been glued together by a regime of fear administered by a minority ethnic group? A functioning state can be built only with the active co-operation of well-organised domestic constituencies. It cannot be imported by an occupying military force. Where are such constituencies in Iraq? Do we believe that militarily powerful outsiders with minimal understanding of Iraqi society can conjure well-organised pro-democratic groupings out of thin air? Or is the Bush Administration, despite its rhetoric about democracy, planning to establish a government in postwar Iraq by, of and for the US military? The failure to think through, in advance, cogent answers to these questions is part of the dubious legacy bequeathed by genuinely well-meaning humanitarian interventionists to the considerably less well-meaning non-humanitarian interventionists who bestride the Potomac today.

Replete with colourful anecdotes, David Halberstam's book also provides a measure of analysis and interpretation. His main story concerns US military interventions after the Cold War, with special focus on Clinton's reluctant use of force in the Balkans. He says he wants to help us understand 'the contradictions and the ambivalence of America as a post-Cold War superpower'. He therefore describes how the sudden collapse of the USSR and the 1990s economic boom led to 'an era of consummate self-indulgence', luring Americans into lowering their collective defences. Foreign policy, he explains, loses its focus in a time of peace.

The entertainment culture, we are also told, has gobbled up the American broadcast media, rewarding 'journalistic feather merchants' and sidelining the kind of serious reporting of foreign news that could help the US exercise responsibly its unparalleled global power. The flattering and teasing portraits Halberstam paints of personal friends, such as Richard Holbrooke, reveal the extent to which this is an insider's tale, a story recounted by someone with enviable access to the Washington political scene. Based on long private conversations with the powerful, the book is meant to make readers feel that they understand the way Washington thinks.

Halberstam catapulted to fame in the early 1970s with *The Best and the Brightest*, his account of the US's catastrophic involvement in Vietnam. He has written many other books in the interim, but it is not surprising that here, returning to foreign affairs, he still has a great deal to say about 'the ghosts of Vietnam'. He writes very well, for instance, about the military's lingering fear of being lured into an impossible quagmire and then being abandoned by a *sauve-qui-peut* civilian leadership. He is also eloquent about the psychological torment of Tony Lake and other onetime anti-war activists who came to power under Clinton and, faced with genocide, learned to jettison their youthful doubts about American military interventions abroad.

This brings us to the principal reason for reading Halberstam alongside Samantha Power. *War in a Time of Peace* inadvertently reveals the story of the author's own dramatic metamorphosis. A beacon to the anti-war generation, Halberstam, too, re-emerged in the 1990s having shed his distrust of American power. He has gone so far in this direction that he seems genuinely dazzled by the high-tech weaponry he describes. The reason for this about-turn is important to notice. For he, like many others, sees in humanitarian intervention an irresistible moral cause that authorises the use of what he had once considered forbidden means. This same change of heart, incidentally, prepared him to compose a patriotic preface to his book after 11 September. He swaggers there about the 'muscularity and flex in American society' and informs the world that 'our strengths, when summoned and focused, when the body politic is aroused and connects to the political process, are never to be underestimated.'

The Washington DC we discover in these pages, however, is not exactly the self-assured capital of a global empire. Muscularity and flex are not much in evidence. Instead, Halberstam's Washington seems like a small town racked by palace intrigue, grandstanding, back-stabbing, information hoarding, careerism, cronyism, bureaucratic inertia, lack of focus and supine inattention. Sometimes decision-makers are excessively cautious, at other times they are madly reckless. We also hear of scandal-mongering, vested interests, tunnel-vision NGOs, obsolete mindsets, CNN-driven policy-making, and self-destructive envy for individuals of exceptional talent. In election years, politicians thrash around blindly in an attempt to humour or captivate public opinion. Overstretched policy-makers feign control when they are actually flying by the

seat of their pants. Cabinet members appearing on Sunday morning talk shows are apprised of their own Administration's policies only after placing frantic Saturday evening phonecalls.

Incoherence and strife, too, are ubiquitous. Tensions between civilians and the military run so deep that they seem cultural rather than merely a matter of turf. Political parties, Congress, the executive branch and the military are all internally divided as well as at war with each other. Halberstam's ruminations on the ideological or normative basis of paralysis in US foreign policy are especially relevant today. Oversized egos are not the only sources of confusion and immobility. Even more important is the war of analogies: namely, the battle between conflicting narratives or interpretative frameworks. Which image will dominate American foreign policy over the next decade: Munich or Vietnam? What should we fear most: appeasing a dictator who will eventually strike us without warning or being dragged into a quagmire? In this ongoing struggle, there is something to be said on both sides. That it cannot be reduced to a battle between reckless warmongers and spineless appeasers is one of Halberstam's wisest claims.

Dampened or disciplined by the Cold War, such conflicts flowered luxuriantly after 1991. Flummoxed by an illusion of peace, the US lost its foreign policy bearings. No one managed to formulate a comprehensive doctrine to replace containment and deterrence. Clinton's unsleeping critics attributed the confusion to a leadership vacuum, to the inability of a domestically oriented President to frame foreign policy issues forcefully. But this problem cannot be laid exclusively at Clinton's feet. In 2000 just as in 1992, a former governor with no foreign policy experience was elected to the Presidency by an electorate profoundly uninterested in the rest of the world. Intervention in the Balkans came so late for the perfectly democratic reason that 'there was little in the way of a constituency, either in or outside the Government, for taking military action against the Serbs.' Blinkered voters get the parochial leaders they want rather than the worldly leaders they presumably need.

Revealingly, Halberstam's book illustrates several of the shortcomings it purports to dissect. It is a Washington-centred study, for one thing, in which voices from Europe or the Balkans are almost never heard. This is not necessarily Halberstam's doing. He spoke to everyone who is anyone in Washington and apparently no one ever mentioned that people elsewhere in the world see things somewhat differently from the way Americans see them. In his concluding remarks, he rather defensively explains: 'This book was always premised to be about America, not about the Balkans or any other foreign country.' To study the use of US military force abroad, intimate knowledge of our allies or even of the countries in which American forces are deployed is apparently optional. Why should the student of American intervention know more about the rest of the world than those who plan and carry out the action?

This attitude may explain why Halberstam leaves unmentioned various interpretations of NATO's Kosovo operation that are widely diffused in the region itself: for instance, that NATO did exactly what Milosevic wanted and that the latter's only mistake was to underestimate the fatigue of the Serbian population that would afterwards drive him from office. The claim that NATO was reading from a script written by Milosevic builds on the premise that, before the war, Kosovo presented Belgrade with an irresolvable dilemma. As a poor Albanian province where few Serbs wished to live, it could not be integrated into Yugoslavia. But Milosevic could not simply grant independence to Kosovo, because of the province's critical role in Serbian national

mythology. The ideal solution, from his point of view, was to have Kosovo ripped away by Serbia's overwhelmingly powerful foreign enemies, allowing him to cut loose the province while appearing to be an unwavering defender of national honour. My point is not that this interpretation of events is accurate or even plausible, merely that it is a commonplace in the Balkans. Halberstam's failure to mention it suggests that what is commonplace in the rest of the world can be totally unheard of in Washington DC.

Today, the US is steadily cutting back its commitment of troops and treasure to the Balkans, despite the unsettled situation in Macedonia, and handing over responsibility to the uncertainly prepared Europeans. Here again Halberstam follows Washington's lead. He, too, turns away from the region, revealing scant interest in the aftermath of military intervention. His few remarks on Bosnia today, for example, indicate a shaky grasp of what it means for international authorities to try to impose a multi-ethnic democracy on three peoples who, after the horrors of 1992-95, have no stomach for knitting together a common life. Having canvassed the opinions of America's foreign policy elite, Halberstam has nothing to say about managing the consequences of US intervention in the Balkans. His book therefore helps us see the world from an increasingly prominent point of view. It provides a window into the mindset of those for whom 'regime change' means destroying a wicked system, full stop, rather than replacing a rotten government with a moderately better one that has a sporting chance to endure.