

The Best
and
the Brightest

David Halberstam

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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David Halberstam, one of America's most brilliant and respected journalists, first came to national prominence in 1962 and 1963 with his reports from Vietnam for *The New York Times*; these dispatches earned him the Pulitzer Prize and several other awards. *Commentary* called him "the *Times*' most exceptional reporter of recent years"; *Harper's* termed him "at the age of thirty-five . . . a legend in American journalism"; and when sociologists at Columbia University polled 150 American intellectuals on the most important influences on their thinking about Vietnam, they responded by citing the late Bernard Fall and Mr. Halberstam. His own journalistic odyssey has taken him from Harvard to the smallest daily in Mississippi for a year, to four years on the *Nashville Tennessean*, and to the *Times*, where he served for six years as a foreign correspondent in Leopoldville, Saigon, and Warsaw. In 1967 he left the *Times* to work for *Harper's* as a contributing editor, where he remained until 1971. He then became a fellow of the Adlai Stevenson Institute. Mr. Halberstam's first major book was *The Making of a Quagmire*, a pessimistic and prophetic report on Vietnam published in early 1965. His other books are *The Breaks of the Game*; *Ho*; *The Noblest Roman*; a novel, *One Very Hot Day*; *The Powers That Be*; and *The Unfinished Odyssey of Robert Kennedy*.

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Chapter One

A COLD day in December. Long afterward, after the assassination and all the pain, the older man would remember with great clarity the young man's grace, his good manners, his capacity to put a visitor at ease. He was concerned about the weather, that the old man not be exposed to the cold or to the probing questions of freezing newspapermen, that he not have to wait for a cab. Instead he had guided his guest to his own car and driver. The older man would remember the young man's good manners almost as clearly as the substance of their talk, though it was an important meeting.

In just a few weeks the young man would become President of the United States, and to the newspapermen standing outside his Georgetown house, there was an air of excitement about every small act, every gesture, every word, every visitor to his temporary headquarters. They complained less than usual, the bitter cold notwithstanding; they felt themselves a part of history: the old was going out and the new was coming in, and the new seemed exciting, promising.

On the threshold of great power and great office, the young man seemed to have everything. He was handsome, rich, charming, candid. The candor was part of the charm: he could beguile a visitor by admitting that everything the visitor proposed was right, rational, proper—but he couldn't do it, not this week, this month, this term. Now he was trying to put together a government, and the candor showed again. He was self-deprecating with the older man. He had spent the last five years, he said ruefully, running for office, and he did not know any real public officials, people to run a government, serious men. The only ones he knew, he admitted, were politicians, and if this seemed a denigration of his own kind, it was not altogether displeasing to the older man. Politicians *did* need men to serve, to run the government. The implication was obvious. Politicians could

run Pennsylvania and Ohio, and if they could not run Chicago they could at least deliver it. But politicians run the world? What did they know about the Germans, the French, the Chinese? He needed experts for that, and now he was summoning them.

The old man was Robert A. Lovett, the symbolic expert, representative of the best of the breed, a great surviving link to a then unquestioned past, to the wartime and postwar successes of the Stimson-Marshall-Acheson years. He was the very embodiment of the Establishment, a man who had a sense of country rather than party. He was above petty divisions, so he could say of his friends, as so many of that group could, that he did not even know to which political party they belonged. He was a man of impeccable credentials, indeed he passed on other people's credentials, deciding who was safe and sound, who was ready for advancement and who was not. He was so much a part of that atmosphere that he was immortalized even in the fiction of his class. Louis Auchincloss, who was the unofficial laureate of that particular world, would have one of his great fictional lawyers say: "I've got that Washington bug. Ever since I had that job with Bob Lovett . . ."

He had been good, very good, going up on the Hill in the old days and soothing things over with recalcitrant Midwestern senators; and he was soft on nothing, that above all—no one would accuse Robert Lovett of being soft. He was a witty and graceful man himself, a friend not just of the powerful, the giants of politics and industry, but of people like Robert Benchley and Lillian Hellman and John O'Hara. He had wit and charm. Even in those tense moments in 1950 when he had been at Defense and MacArthur was being MacArthur, Lovett had amused his colleagues at high-level meetings with great imitations of MacArthur's vanities, MacArthur in Korea trying to comb his few strands of hair from side to side over his pate to hide his baldness, while standing in the blast of prop-plane engines at Kimpo Airfield.

They got along well, these two men who had barely known each other before. Jack Kennedy the President-elect, who in his campaign had summoned the nation's idealism, but who was at least as skeptical as he was idealistic, curiously ill at ease with other people's overt idealism, preferring in private the tart and darker view of the world and of mankind of a skeptic like Lovett.

In addition to his own misgivings he had constantly been

warned by one of his more senior advisers that in order to deal with State effectively, he had to have a real man there. That State was filled with sissies in striped pants and worse. That senior adviser was Joseph Kennedy, Sr., and he consistently pushed, in discussions with his son, the name of Robert Lovett, who he felt was the best of those old-time Wall Street people. For Robert Lovett understood power, where it resided, how to exercise it. He had exercised it all his life, yet he was curiously little known to the general public. The anonymity was not entirely by chance, for he was the embodiment of the public servant—financier who is so secure in his job, the value of it, his right to do it, that he does not need to seek publicity, to see his face on the cover of a magazine or on television, to feel reassured. Discretion is better, anonymity is safer: his peers know him, know his role, know that he can get things done. Publicity sometimes frightens your superiors, annoys congressional adversaries (when Lovett was at Defense, the senior members of the Armed Services committees never had to read in newspapers and magazines how brilliant Lovett was, how well he handled the Congress; rather they read how much he admired the Congress). He was the private man in the public society *par excellence*. He did not need to impress people with false images. He knew the rules of the game: to whom you talked, what you said, to whom you did not talk, which journalists were your kind, would, without being told, know what to print for the greater good, which questions to ask, and which questions not to ask. He lived in a world where young men made their way up the ladder by virtue not just of their own brilliance and ability but also of who their parents were, which phone calls from which old friends had preceded their appearance in an office. In a world like this he knew that those whose names were always in print, who were always on the radio and television, were there precisely because they did *not* have power, that those who did hold or had access to power tried to keep out of sight. He was a twentieth-century man who did not hold press conferences, who never ran for anything. The classic insider's man.

He was born in Huntsville, Texas, in 1895, the son of Robert Scott Lovett, a general counsel for Harriman's Union Pacific Railway, a railroad lawyer, a power man in those rough and heady days, who then became a judge, very much a part of the power structure, the Texas arm of it, and eventually a member of the Union Pacific board of directors

and president of the railway. His son Bob would do all the right Eastern things, go to the right schools, join the right clubs (Hill School, Yale, Skull and Bones). He helped form the Yale unit of pilots which flew in World War I, and he commanded the first U.S. Naval Air Squadron. He married well, Adele Brown, the beautiful daughter of James Brown, a senior partner in the great banking firm of Brown Brothers.

Since those post-college years were a bad time for the railways, he went to work for Brown Brothers, starting at \$1,080 a year, a fumbling-fingered young clerk who eventually rose to become a partner and finally helped to arrange the merger of Brown Brothers with the Harriman banking house to form the powerful firm of Brown Bros., Harriman & Co. So he came naturally to power, to running things, to knowing people, and his own marriage had connected him to the great families. His view of the world was a banker's view, the right men making the right decisions, stability to be preserved. The status quo was good, one did not question it.

He served overseas in London, gaining experience in foreign affairs, though like most influential Americans who would play a key role in foreign affairs entering government through the auspices of the Council on Foreign Relations, the group which served as the Establishment's unofficial club, it was with the eyes of a man with a vested interest in the static world, where business could take place as usual, where the existing order could and should be preserved. He saw the rise of Hitler and the coming military importance of air power; when he returned to America he played a major role in speeding up America's almost nonexistent air defenses. He served with great distinction during World War II, a member of that small inner group which worked for Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Chief of Staff George C. Marshall ("There are three people I cannot say no to," Lovett would say when asked back into government in the late forties, "Colonel Stimson, General Marshall and my wife"). That small group of policy makers came from the great banking houses and law firms of New York and Boston. They knew one another, were linked to one another, and they guided America's national security in those years, men like James Forrestal, Douglas Dillon and Allen Dulles. Stimson and then Marshall had been their great leaders, and although they had worked for Roosevelt, it was not because of him, but almost in spite of him; they had been linked more to Stimson than to Roosevelt. And they were linked

more to Acheson and Lovett than to Truman; though Acheson was always quick to praise Truman, there were those who believed that there was something unconsciously patronizing in Acheson's tones, his description of Truman as a great little man, and a sense that Acheson felt that much of Truman's greatness came from his willingness to listen to Acheson. They were men linked more to one another, their schools, their own social class and their own concerns than they were linked to the country. Indeed, about one of them, Averell Harriman, there would always be a certain taint, as if somehow Averell were a little too partisan and too ambitious (Averell had wanted to be President whereas the rest of them knew that the real power lay in letting the President come to them; the President could take care of rail strikes, minimum wages and farm prices, and they would take care of national security). Averell had, after all—there was no getting around it—run for public office and won; he seemed too much the politician and too much the intriguer for them. Perhaps not as bad as Roosevelt, but not exactly one of them, either.

In 1947, after Acheson had resigned as Undersecretary of State, Marshall (who was then head of State) chose Robert Lovett as his successor, and in 1950 he became Secretary of Defense. If the torch had been passed in earlier years to Elihu Root and Teddy Roosevelt and then to Stimson and Marshall, by 1960 Lovett was next. He had become, now as the sixties were about to begin, the great link to the Stimson-Marshall era. Acheson was a link too, but somehow Acheson had been scarred during the McCarthy era; it was not so much that he had done anything wrong as the fact that he had been forced to defend himself. By that very defense, by all the publicity, he had become controversial. He had been in print too often, it was somehow indiscreet of Dean to be attacked by McCarthy. Lovett was cleaner and he seemed to represent a particularly proud and, more important, successful tradition. For the private men felt they had succeeded admirably: they had taken a great dormant democracy, tuned it up for victory over Japan and Germany, stopped the Russian advance in Europe after the war and rebuilt Western Europe under the plan whose very name was more meaningful to them than to most others. The Marshall Plan had stopped the Communists, had brought the European nations back from destruction and decay, had performed an economic miracle; and there was, given the can-do nature of Americans, a tendency on their

part to take perhaps more credit than might be proper for the actual operation of the Marshall Plan, a belief that *they* had done it and controlled it, rather than an admission that it had been the proper prescription for an economically weakened Europe and that it was the Europeans themselves who had worked the wonders. Yet it seemed as if history had come their way: just as they had predicted, the Russians proved untrustworthy and ungentlemanly (by 1944 there had been growing tensions between Roosevelt and some of his national security people over Soviet postwar aims; the national security people had held a view more parallel to that of Churchill) and had tried to expand in Europe, but Western democratic leadership had turned them back. They were not surprised that a cold war ensued; its very existence made their role, their guidance more necessary than ever. Without the Cold War—its dangers, tensions and threats—there might have been considerably less need of them and their wisdom and respectability. The lesson of history from Munich to Berlin was basic, they decided: one had to stand up, to be stern, to be tough. Lovett himself would talk of those years in the late forties as almost miraculous ones, when the American executive branch and the Congress were as one, when the Marshall Plan, the Point Four program and NATO had come about and been approved.

The men of that era believed, to an uncommon degree, that their view of history had been confirmed; only a very few questioned it. One of their eggheads, George F. Kennan, became in the fifties increasingly disillusioned with the thrust of American policy, believing that those men had exaggerated Soviet intentions in Western Europe, and had similarly exaggerated their own role and NATO's role in stopping them. But Kennan was too much of an intellectual; he had been useful to them in the early part of the Cold War, but he became less useful as his own doubts grew; beside he was not a central member of their group—Lovett was.

SO that cold December day Kennedy was lunching with a man who not only symbolized a group, the Establishment, and was a power broker who carried the proxies for the great law firms and financial institutions, but was also tied to a great and seemingly⁴awesome era. If Kennedy, as he always did in that period, complained that he knew no experts, that was no problem; the Establishment had long

lists and it would be delighted to co-operate with this young President, help him along. It was of course above politics. It feared the right (the Goldwater campaign of 1964 was an assault on the entrenched powerful Eastern money by the new and powerless Southern and Western money; it was not by chance that the principal villain for them at San Francisco had been Nelson Rockefeller), and it feared the left; it held what was proclaimed to be the center. More often than not it was Republican, though it hedged its bets. A few members were nominal if cautious Democrats, and some families were very good about it—the Bundy family had produced William for the Democrats, and McGeorge for the Republicans—and it was believed that every major law firm should have at least one partner who was a Democrat. In fact, on the question of Kennedy and Nixon there had been an element of indecision in the Establishment world. One had a sense of the Establishment in an election year being like a professional athletic scout watching a championship match, emotionally uninvolved with either competitor, waiting until it was over and then descending to the locker room of the winner, to sign him on, to offer him the club's facilities—in this case the trusted, respectable, sound men of the Establishment.

Kennedy believed in the Establishment mystique; there had, after all, been little debunking of it in early 1960. Rarely had there been such a political consensus on foreign affairs: containment was good, Communism was dangerous, there was of course the problem of getting foreign aid bills through Congress, bills which would help us keep the Third World from the Communists. Besides, he was young, and since his victory over Nixon was slimmer than he had expected, he needed the backing of this club, the elitists of the national security people. And he felt at ease with them: after Chester Bowles and Adlai Stevenson and all the other Democratic eggheads pushing their favorite causes, Lovett, who seemingly pushed no causes and had no ideology, was a relief.

The two touched each other immediately. When Kennedy asked Lovett what the financial community thought of John Kenneth Galbraith's economic views (Galbraith being one of the President's earliest and strongest supporters), he was much amused when Lovett answered that the community thought he was a fine novelist. And when Lovett told Kennedy that he had not voted for him, Kennedy just grinned at the news, though he might have grinned somewhat less at Lovett's

reason, which was Lovett's reservation about old Joe Kennedy. In a way, of course, this would have made Lovett all the more attractive, since much of the Kennedy family's thrust was motivated by the Irish desire to make these patricians, who had snubbed Joe Kennedy, reckon with his sons; this meeting was, if anything, part of the reckoning. ("Tell me," Rose Kennedy once asked a young and somewhat shocked aristocratic college classmate of Jack Kennedy's back in 1939 as she drove him from Hyannisport to Boston, "when are the good people of Boston going to accept us Irish?")

The meeting continued pleasantly, Caroline darting in and out, carrying a football, emphasizing to Lovett the youth and the enormity of the task before this man. Lovett had a feeling that he was taking too much of the President-elect's time, but he found that just the opposite was true. Kennedy tried hard to bring Lovett into the government, to take a job, any job (earlier Kennedy had sent Clark Clifford as a messenger with the offer to serve as Secretary of the Treasury, which Lovett had turned down). Lovett, who had not voted for Kennedy, could have State, Defense or Treasury ("I think because I had been in both State and Defense he thought he was getting two men for the price of one," Lovett would later say). Lovett declined regretfully again, explaining that he had been ill, bothered by severe ulcers, and each time after his last three government tours he had gone to the hospital. Now they had taken out part of his stomach, and he did not feel he was well enough to take on any of these jobs. Again Kennedy complained about his lack of knowledge of the right people, but Lovett told him not to worry, he and his friends would supply him with lists. Take Treasury, for instance—there Kennedy would want a man of national reputation, a skilled professional, well known and respected by the banking houses. There were Henry Alexander at Morgan, and Jack McCloy at Chase, and Gene Black at the World Bank. Doug Dillon too. Lovett said he didn't know their politics. Well, he reconsidered, he knew McCloy was an independent Republican, and Dillon had served in a Republican Administration, but, he added, he did not know the politics of Black and Alexander at all (their real politics of course being business). At State, Kennedy wanted someone who would reassure European governments: they discussed names and Lovett pushed, as would Dean Acheson, the name of someone little known to the voters, a young fellow who had been a particular favor-