

WAR  
IN A TIME  
OF  
PEACE



BUSH, CLINTON, and the GENERALS

David  
Halberstam

Author of THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST

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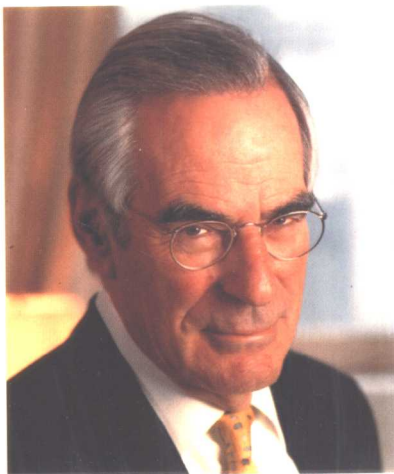
In this long-awaited successor to his #1 national bestseller *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam describes in fascinating human detail how the shadow of the Cold War still hangs over American foreign policy and how domestic politics have determined our role as a world power.

More than twenty-five years ago Halberstam told the riveting story of the men who conceived and executed the Vietnam War. Today the Pulitzer Prize-winning author has written another unforgettable chronicle of Washington politics, this time exploring the complex dynamics of foreign policy in post-Cold War America.

Halberstam brilliantly evokes the internecine conflicts, the untrammelled egos, and the struggles for dominance among the key figures in the White House, the State Department, and the military. He shows how the decisions of men who served in the Vietnam War—such as General Colin Powell and presidential advisers Richard Holbrooke and Anthony Lake—and those who did not have shaped American politics and policy makers (perhaps most notably, President Clinton's placing, for the first time in fifty years, domestic issues over foreign policy).

With his uncanny ability to find the real story behind the headlines, Halberstam shows how current events in the Balkans, Somalia, and Haiti reflect American politics and foreign policy. He discusses the repercussions in Washington on policy makers from two different administrations; the wariness of the American military to become caught again in an inconclusive ground war; the frustrations of civilian advisers, most of whom have never served in the military; and the effects these conflicting forces have on the American commander in Kosovo, General Wesley Clark.

Sweeping in its scope and impressive in its depth, *War in a Time of Peace* provides fascinating portraits of Clinton, Bush, Reagan, Kissinger, James Baker, Dick Cheney, Madeleine Albright, and others, to reveal a stunning view of modern political America.



**David Halberstam** is one of America's most distinguished journalists and historians, a man whose newspaper reporting and books have helped define the era we live in. He graduated from Harvard in 1955, took his first job on the smallest daily in Mississippi, and then covered the early civil rights struggle for the *Nashville Tennessean*. He joined *The New York Times* in 1960, went overseas almost immediately, first to the Congo and then to Vietnam. His early pessimistic dispatches from Vietnam won him the Pulitzer in 1964 at the age of thirty. His last twelve books, starting with *The Best and the Brightest* and including *The Powers That Be*, *The Reckoning*, and *The Fifties*, have all been national bestsellers. This is his seventeenth book. He is a member of the elective Society of American Historians.

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HO

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THE POWERS THAT BE

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THE BREAKS OF THE GAME

THE AMATEURS

SUMMER OF '49

THE NEXT CENTURY

THE FIFTIES

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THE CHILDREN

PLAYING FOR KEEPS



# WAR IN A TIME OF PEACE

BUSH, CLINTON, AND THE GENERALS

DAVID HALBERSTAM

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*For Russell and Mimi Baker*





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## CHAPTER ONE

For a brief, glorious, almost Olympian moment it appeared that the presidency itself could serve as the campaign. Rarely had an American president seemed so sure of reelection. In the summer and fall of 1991, George Bush appeared to be politically invincible. His personal approval ratings in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War had reached 90 percent, unheard of for any sitting president, and even more remarkable for someone like Bush, a competent political insider whose charisma and capacity to inspire had in the past escaped most of his fellow citizens. Of his essential decency and competence there had been little doubt, and the skill with which he had presided over the end of the Cold War had impressed not merely the inner club that monitored foreign policy decision-making, but much of the country as well. With exceptional sensitivity, he had juggled and balanced his own political needs with the greater political needs of his newest partner in this joint endeavor, Mikhail Gorbachev. For Bush was quite aware that Gorbachev's political equation was much more fragile than his own, and he had been careful to be the more generous member of this unlikely two-man team that was negotiating the end of almost forty-five years of terrifying bipolar tensions.

One moment had seemed to symbolize the supreme confidence of the Bush people during this remarkable chain of events. It came in mid-August of 1991, when some Russian right-wingers mounted a coup against Gorbachev and Bush held firm, trying at first to support Gorbachev and, unable to reach him, then using his influence to help the embattled Boris Yeltsin. The coup had failed. A few days later, Gorbachev, restored to power in part because of the leverage of Washington, had resigned from the Communist Party. To the Bush people that attempted coup had been a reminder that with the Cold War officially ended or not, the Berlin Wall up or down, the world was still a dangerous place, which meant that the country would surely need and want an experienced leader, preferably a Republican, at the helm. Aboard *Air Force One* at that time, flying with his father from Washington back to the Bush family's vacation home in Maine, was George W. Bush, the president's son. He was just coming of age as a political operative in his own right, and he was euphoric about the meaning of these latest events. "Do you think the American people are going to turn to a Democrat *now*?" he asked.<sup>1</sup>

Bush himself believed he was invulnerable. He had presided over the end of the Cold War with considerable distinction. He had handled the delicate job of dealing with the complicated international events that had led to the end of European communism, thereby freeing the satellite nations of Eastern Europe, and perhaps most remarkably of all, gaining, with Russian approval, a unified Germany that was a member of NATO. But typically he had held back on participating in any kind of celebration to mark those stunning events.

When the Berlin Wall had come down, many in the right wing, and a number of people around Bush himself, wanted some kind of ceremony, for this was a historic moment and they believed it deserved a commemoration not unlike those that had attended V-E and V-J Days in World War II, the victories in Europe over Germany, and in the Pacific over Japan. The destruction of the wall represented not merely the West's triumph in a long, difficult struggle against a formidable adversary, but equally important, a triumph in their minds of good over evil, proof that we had been right *and they had been wrong*, and that our system was politically, economically, ethically, and spiritually superior to theirs. At the very least there should be, they believed, one momentous speech to recount the history of the Cold War and celebrate the victory of the forces of light over darkness.

But Bush was uncomfortable with the idea of a celebration, aware that he had little flare for the dramatic. "I'm not going to dance on the wall," he told his aides. Even as the wall was coming down, Marlin Fitzwater, his press officer, had invited a small group of reporters into the Oval Office to talk with the president, but they found his answers cautious, curiously without emotion, almost joyless. Bush was sparring with them. Why wasn't he more excited? a reporter asked. I'm not an emotional kind of guy, he answered. "Maybe," he said later by way of explaining his self-restraint, "I should have given them one of these," and he leapt in the air in a parody of a then popular Toyota commercial portraying a happy car owner jumping and clicking his heels together.<sup>2</sup> On *Saturday Night Live*, comic Dana Carvey, who often parodied Bush, showed him watching scenes of Berliners celebrating the destruction of the wall but refusing to join in. "Wouldn't be prudent," he said. Then Carvey-as-Bush pointed at himself: "Place in history? *Se-cure!*"

So, much to the disappointment of many on the right, Bush was anxious to minimize the event as a symbolic occasion. It was against his nature. Taking personal credit for any kind of larger success, not all of which was his, conflicted with the way he had been brought up. He believed—an attitude that was surely old-fashioned and quite optimistic in an age of ever more carefully orchestrated political spin, when the sizzle was more important than the steak—that if you did the right things in the right way, people would know about it. You should never call attention to yourself or, worse, advertise your accomplishments. Besides, Bush put a primacy on personal relationships, and

by then he had begun to forge one with Mikhail Gorbachev and was obviously unwilling to do anything that would make things more difficult for his new ally. The more Bush celebrated, the more vulnerable Gorbachev and the other more democratically inclined figures in the Soviet Union were likely to be. Celebrating was like gloating and Bush would not gloat. (A few months later, getting close to an election campaign, Bush was more emboldened, and when he delivered his January 1992 State of the Union speech, with an election year just beginning, he did give the United States credit for winning the Cold War. Gorbachev, by then ousted from power, was not amused and said that the end of the Cold War was "our common victory. We should give credit to all politicians who participated in that victory.")

It was probably just as well that Bush did not try to grab too much credit for the collapse of communism, for what had transpired was a triumphal victory for an idea rather than for any one man or political faction. The Soviet Union had turned out to be, however involuntarily, the perfect advertisement for the free society, suggesting in the end that harsh, authoritarian controls and systems did not merely limit political, intellectual, and spiritual freedom, but economic freedom and military development as well. They limited not just the freedom of the individual, something that many rulers in many parts of the world would gladly accommodate, but in the end limited the sum strength and might of the state, which was a very different thing. Therefore, what the proponents of an open society had long argued, that freedom was indivisible, and that the freedom to speak openly and candidly about political matters was in the long run inseparable from the freedom to invent some new high-technology device, or to run a brilliant new company, was true. The rights of man included not merely the right to compose and send an angry letter to a newspaper complaining about the government, they included as well as the right to choose where he went to work, and his right to garner, if he so chose and worked hard enough and with enough originality, far greater material rewards than his neighbors. The Soviet system was a devastating argument for what the lack of choice did, and what happened when a society was run top to bottom, instead of bottom to top. When George Bush had taken office, the Soviet system had begun to collapse of its own weight. Clearly by the eighties, communist rule, as critics had long suggested, had undermined the nation itself, weakening it, particularly in a high-tech age when there was such an immediate and direct connection between the vitality of the domestic economy and a nation's military capacity, and when the gap between American weaponry and that of the Soviets had begun to widen at an ever greater rate.

Symbols had never been Bush's strength, and those who were dissatisfied with his innate caution liked to imagine what Ronald Reagan—who was always so brilliant with symbols and had a God-given sense of when and how to use them—might have done had he still been president when the wall fell.

Possibly he would have ventured to Berlin for some wonderful kind of ceremony that the entire nation, perhaps the entire free world, could have shared. But Reagan was then and Bush was now, and unlike his predecessor (and his successor), Bush tended to downplay ceremonial moments. Many in the right wing who had often found him to be of too little ideological faith were again let down. Once more he had proven himself unworthy, placing success in a delicate and as yet unfinished geopolitical process above the temptation to savor what might have been a glorious historic moment.

Bush's belief that process always took precedence over image confirmed his reputation, essentially well-deserved, as a cautious insider rather than a public figure who knew how to rise to historic occasions and use symbols to bring the nation together. In a way it was Bush at both his best and worst. At his worst, he failed to take a memorable event and outline what it meant in larger terms of the long, hard struggle of a free society against a totalitarian state, and perhaps at the very least to showcase those remarkable people in Eastern Europe whose faith in a better, more democratic way during the long, dark hours of communist suppression was finally being rewarded. But it was also Bush at his best, because he was unwilling to exploit a vulnerable colleague—Gorbachev—and his distress and humiliation for political profit. Bush, after all, was first and foremost a team player, and unlikely though it might have seemed just a few years earlier, Gorbachev was now his teammate.

Whether or not he celebrated the end of the Cold War, it appeared to be just one more significant boost to his presidency. And it came at virtually the same time that American military forces, as the dominating part of the United Nations coalition, had defeated the Iraqi army in a devastating four-day land war, a rout preceded by five weeks of lethal, high-precision, high-technology air dominance. The stunning success of the American units in the Persian Gulf War, the cool efficiency of their weapons and the almost immediate collapse of the Iraqi forces, had been savored by most Americans as more than a victory over an Arab nation about which they knew little and which had invaded a small, autocratic, oil-producing duchy about which they knew even less. Rather, it had ended a period of frustration and self-doubt that had tormented many Americans for some twenty years as a result of any number of factors: the deep embarrassment of the Vietnam War, the humiliation suffered during the Iranian hostage crisis, and the uneasiness about a core economy that was in disrepair and was falling behind the new muscle of a confident, powerful Japan, known now in American business circles as Japan Inc.

The Gulf War showed that the American military had recovered from the malaise of the Vietnam debacle and was once again the envy of the rest of the world, with the morale and skill level of the fighting men themselves matching the wonders of the weapons they now had at their disposal. The lessons of the Gulf War were obvious, transcending simple military capacity and extend-

ing in some larger psychological sense to a broader national view of our abilities. We were back, and American forces could not be pushed around again. Perhaps we had slipped a bit in the production of cars, but American goods, in this case its modern weapons, were still the best in the world. The nation became, once again, strong, resilient, and optimistic.

The troops who fought in the Gulf War were honored as the troops who had fought in Vietnam were not. Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf, the presiding generals of the war, were celebrated as William Westmoreland had never been. Shades of World War II: Powell was the new Eisenhower, the thoughtful, careful, tough but benign overall planner; and Schwarzkopf was the new Patton, the crusty, cigar-chomping, hell-for-leather combat commander. There was a joyous victory parade in Washington, and then they were honored again at a tumultuous ticker-tape parade in New York. Powell's security people had suggested that he wear a flak vest, but he felt he was heavy enough without one, and he was driven along the parade route in an open 1959 Buick convertible without protection. Both Schwarzkopf and Powell were from the New York area, Schwarzkopf the son of the head of the New Jersey State Police, and Powell the son of parents who had both worked in the garment district. Powell's memory of occasions like this was of newsreel clips of parades for Lindbergh, Eisenhower, and MacArthur. Now riding through a blizzard of ticker tape raining down on himself and Schwarzkopf, he was delighted; all this fuss, he thought, for two local boys who had made good.<sup>3</sup>

Nineteen ninety-one had been an excellent year for George Bush. It had ended with the ultimate Christmas present for an American president when Gorbachev had called to wish him well personally, and to inform him that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist. Gorbachev, the last leader of the USSR, was resigning and turning over power to Boris Yeltsin, the new leader of Russia. Earlier in the day, Gorbachev had told Ted Koppel of *Nightline* that he was something of a modern-day Russian pioneer because he was participating in the peaceful transfer of power, acting in accordance with a formula that was democratic, something relatively new in Moscow. Then, in a warm, rather affectionate conversation with Bush, he said he was turning over what he called the little suitcase, the bag that contained the authorization codes to activate the Soviet nuclear arsenal, to the president of the Russian Republic. Even so, he could not bear to mention Yeltsin, his sworn enemy, by name.<sup>4</sup> The deed was done and Gorbachev was gone. (As Raisa Gorbachev had shrewdly observed after returning from an immensely successful trip to the United States in June 1990, "The thing about innovations is that sooner or later they turn around and destroy the innovators."<sup>5</sup>)

Some of that special call announcing the end of the Soviet Union was even watched on television. Gorbachev, the product of the most secretive society in the world, was now a media-savvy man who had learned to play to interna-



tional as well as domestic opinion. Bush would later discover that Gorbachev had allowed Koppel and *Nightline* to televise his end of their two-person phone call. It was the climax of a year that most American presidents only dream of. It seemed like the rarest of times, when almost all the news was good and Bush was the primary beneficiary. His presidency was an immense success and his reelection appeared to be a sure thing.

But there were already signs that a powerful new undertow was at work in American politics, and Bush and the people around him were, for a variety of reasons, most of them generational, slow to recognize it. But the signs of significant political and social change were there nonetheless. They reflected a certain lack of gratitude on the part of all kinds of ordinary people for the successes of the last three years, and a growing anger—indeed perhaps rage—about the state of the American economy. There was also a concurrent belief that George Bush was certainly capable of being an effective world leader, but domestic problems and issues, in this case, principally, the economy, did not matter as much to him as foreign affairs. A number of different pollsters were picking up on this undertow of discontent, among them Stan Greenberg, a former Yale professor who was polling for the young would-be Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton, and Fred Steeper, who had impeccable Republican connections and was polling for the Republican National Committee. Steeper was working out of the office of Bob Teeter, a leading Republican public opinion expert, who was one of George Bush's closest friends and political allies and would be among the men directing his campaign for reelection. Normally Steeper would have been polling for Bush directly, but due to a temporary breakdown in polling in 1991 because of factional differences in the White House, he had ended up working for the RNC.

By the early nineties, polling had become an ever more exact and important instrument of American politics, though some old-timers from an earlier political era were made uneasy by it. They especially distrusted those politicians who used it on all occasions for all purposes and appeared to have no inner value system or beliefs that could withstand the alleged truths produced by polling. But used properly, polls could reveal some things. Used properly, they could serve as a good DEW-line alert system for forces that might soon represent important shifts of public opinion. At the very least they could reveal the primacy of issues, and this would turn out to be one of those occasions. Fred Steeper thought he had been detecting signs of a growing economic malaise for quite a while and a resulting public disenchantment with Bush's attempts to deal with the economy. The huge budget deficits produced by Reagan's tax policies had led to a bitterly debated decision in 1990 on the part of George Bush to go for a tax increase. Campaigning for election in 1988, he had vowed not to raise taxes—"Read my lips. No new taxes," he had said during the campaign. By breaking that promise he had angered many in