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Book Review. American War in the 1990s

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American War in the 1990s

DAVID G. DELANEY

REVIEW OF DAVID HALBERSTAM

War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals

(New York: Scribner, 2001) \$28 cloth

George W. Bush's war against terrorism reminds Americans how a unifying theme or organizing principle in foreign affairs can center a president's policy, particularly with respect to the use of military force. In contrast, the last decade in global events was characterized largely by internal and ethnic conflict, humanitarian crises, and the emergence of a unipolar international system—traits that do not readily suggest a single (or clear) mission for U.S. military forces. Yet U.S. troops undertook new missions in Africa, Central America, and Europe during the 1990s without a coherent concept of where to intervene or how to define success. *War in a Time of Peace* describes the processes that sent Americans to confront crises in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and particularly Kosovo, though not Rwanda. David Halberstam succeeds brilliantly in relating many of the important domestic and international events that frame those operations through the eyes of those who planned and directed them.

Halberstam's success, as in *The Best and the Brightest*, his acclaimed account of America's involvement in Vietnam, derives primarily from his broad scope and eloquent, novel-like narrative. He draws substance from interviews with dozens of senior civilian and military policymakers from the Bush and Clinton administrations and links their past foreign policy experiences to their current professional responsibilities. Larry Eagleburger, the Kissinger protégé admired within his department as the only foreign service officer to serve as secretary of state, battled with his conscience on supporting the independence-minded Croats and Slovenes. Les Aspin, the former House Armed Services Committee chairman and long-time secretary of defense aspirant, unsuccessfully sought access to and guidance from

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the president and took the fall for failure in Somalia. Tony Lake and Richard Holbrooke, the bright survivors of disaffected 1960s and 1970s foreign service officers, argued that intervention in Bosnia need not repeat the failures they witnessed in Vietnam. Halberstam asserts that despite this abundance of bright minds, extensive experience, and personal commitment to effective foreign policy, the lack of clearly articulated national interests hindered America's ability to use military force appropriately.

Through chapter-length biographies and psychoanalytical sketches of the key players, Halberstam points to interpersonal dynamics as largely determinative in shaping U.S. military action. Madeleine Albright is the outside-the-boys-club

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academic whose public grandstanding as UN ambassador and secretary of state distanced her from fellow policymakers and marginalized her effectiveness in calling for earlier action in Kosovo. General Wesley Clark is the do-good officer of tomorrow's military who stepped too heavily on Pentagon toes and too quickly into White House decision-making circles to win Kosovo his way. And President Clinton is the "emotionally-truncated man-child" who spent 25 percent of his time on foreign affairs (compared to 60 percent for other presidents) believing that his foreign policy advisers should conjure up effective crisis-

response plans à la carte without his guidance. As Halberstam demonstrates, Somalia and Bosnia proved that Clinton could not choose a military course of action or long-term policy program in the same way he polled Americans for a centrist position on tricky domestic issues. In fact "centering" foreign policy might require a worldview reflecting the commander in chief's vision—a point Halberstam shows that Clinton learned belatedly and only while searching for his presidential legacy in Middle East peace efforts.

As in Halberstam's previous works, *War in a Time of Peace* is not policy analysis but journalistic history, and as such it includes all the requisite references to 1990s pop-political waypoints. "It's the economy, stupid" marks the 1992 election, and the physical evidence that Monica Lewinsky produced against President Clinton encouraged the "vast right-wing conspiracy" against him. These events occasionally draw Halberstam into moderate overstatement and passing commentary that many will find distracting if not erroneous. According to him, Ken Starr's inquiry into Lewinsky's book-buying habits is "not one of American democracy's finest moments," and Clinton, despite his transgressions, did not

diminish the office of the presidency but merely "*his own* presidency." Yet these traits of the genre do not interfere with Halberstam's ability to elucidate the Bush and Clinton decision-making processes.

As a tool to explain why the United States (and the world) ignored genocide in Rwanda and failed to intervene sooner in Bosnia and Kosovo, however, the book's focus on interpersonal relationships has limited effectiveness. Although Vietnam's shadows are unavoidable in this tale, Halberstam implicitly captures the increasing difficulty of relying on Cold War-era terminology to assess contemporary political-military policies. Policymakers themselves are no longer simply "hawks" or "doves." One must consider, for example, the events that led National Security Adviser Sandy Berger to evolve rather quickly from a position of skepticism and inaction to one advocating uncompromising victory in the Kosovo air war. Equally essential to understanding the period are NATO's struggle to define its role as it approached its fiftieth anniversary, the role of international law in prohibiting Kosovo-like wars in the name of humanitarian goals, and the status of America's military in society. Unfortunately, Halberstam provides almost no detail on these topics.

For example, the discussion of consequential military matters ends with cursory treatment of tensions among the military's "intellectual" and "warrior" senior leaders and the 1993 "don't ask, don't tell" policy. More revealing of the serious strains placed on the 1990s military were the numerous issues related to reshaping the military into a war-in-a-time-of-peace fighting force without sacrificing the ability to win decisively in large-scale, conventional combat. The defense department instituted a bottom-up budget review and struggled with the two-major regional conflict model, and the army departed from its air-land battle doctrine and developed a light brigade concept that is just now being tested in the field. In essence, every small-unit leader training for an "operation other than war" was concerned about how closed bases, reduced troop levels, changed promotion-systems, altered equipment procurement programs, decreased training funds, restructured retirement benefits, and increased operations tempo would affect his unit's ability to fight and win.

Nevertheless, Halberstam's themes are clear and inescapable. The use of military force always amounts to *de facto* warfighting, not antiseptic treatment, whether forces are protecting Somalian food convoys or compelling Slobodan Milosevic's compliance in Kosovo. Diplomatic efforts, such as Warren

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Christopher's failed May 1993 trip to engage European allies on lifting the arms embargo and using airpower in Bosnia, require strategic forethought, resolve, and leadership. Finally, President Clinton remained personally uncommitted to his policies, particularly by limiting the U.S. force commitment in Bosnia to one year and by hedging on whether to use ground troops in Kosovo.

While grand political-military strategy alone never guarantees successful foreign policy, by definition it provides a guiding principle, a "centering" theme, on which the labyrinthine, bureaucratic policymaking process of modern governance necessarily relies. Presidents play the critical role in setting that agenda, and ad hoc programs may not suffice. As the war on terrorism demonstrates, a central tenet in foreign policy need not prescribe precisely when to commit American forces or how to set correlative political goals, but does need to provide an organizing principle on which bureaucratic organizations can respond when required. Failing to stake out this center, wherever it lies on the political spectrum, may doom an administration to failure. In presenting this perspective, *War in a Time of Peace* helps elucidate 1990s American foreign policy decision making and encourages Americans to consider that their role in foreign policy success begins long before crises appear as news broadcasts—it begins with the election of the president. ■