

OPINION

Halberstam's Memorial Brings Vietnam, Iraq Generations Closer

BY RICHARD BERNSTEIN
INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

Paul Simon was there to sing one of the emblematic songs of his generation, "Mrs Robinson." Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary (who sang "If I Had a Hammer" just before Martin Luther King Jr gave his "I Have a Dream" speech at the landmark 1963 civil rights march on Washington) sang, too.

The memorial service for David Halberstam, author of "The Best and the Brightest" and many other books, took place last week in the cavernous Riverside Church, and it was an elegant farewell to one of the most famous journalists of our time, and it was something else as well. Halberstam died in April in a traffic collision in California, where he was, characteristically, doing research for a new book.

The something else of the Riverside Church memorial had to do with the sense it gave of a generation slowly ambling off one of the more prominent stages of recent history, a stage where a good deal of the collective consciousness was forged. In recent months, the novelists Kurt Vonnegut and William Styron have died; so have the historian Arthur Schlesinger and RW Apple Jr, a mainstay of political

analysis for The New York Times for as long as most people can remember.

Newspapers have a stock of what editors call advance obituaries, so they will have articles ready if an actuarially probable demise of some prominent person occurs close to deadline. Halberstam's memorial was in its way a chance for members of a special generation to read aloud its own advance obit.

"It was like a wake for the consciousness of the Vietnam period," said Jonathan Segal, a senior editor at the publisher Alfred Knopf, who edited the books of some of the members of the exclusive Halberstam club. "Young people today may be concerned about Iraq and worried about the Middle East, but for them Vietnam and all that came with it are ancient history."

Kati Marton said, "There was a poignancy in all those gray heads and stooped backs." The journalist and writer—who was at the memorial with her husband, Richard Holbrooke, a possible candidate for secretary of state if the next president is a Democrat—met Halberstam in Vietnam in the early 1960s, when one was a young journalist and the other a fledgling diplomat.

Over the years, many of that small band who shared the unfor-

gettable, disheartening and also illuminating spectacle of the US failing in war for the first time in its history have remained friends. There were only a couple dozen of them in that time in the early 1960s before the US war in Vietnam became their story of the century.

They discovered a historic truth, which the US military and government chose willfully to reject—namely that the other side was winning the war because the South Vietnamese government was corrupt and incompetent.

And so was born the adversarial relationship between the press and the government that endures: the suspicion that generals and secretaries of defense might actually have little idea of what they are doing.

No doubt that is why so many braved heavy afternoon showers to be at the Halberstam memorial service. He was a great reporter, a devourer of worlds. But he was mostly celebrated at Riverside Church because he brought so powerful a moral urgency to his writing.

"I don't think David was so much a symbol of the generation as he was an unusual person in our generation," said Leslie Gelb, a former diplomat and journalist who also first knew Halberstam in Vietnam

in the early 1960s. "Namely, he was a warrior.

"He was a guy who saw right and wrong and had rather strong feelings about it," Gelb continued, "and once he determined who was right and who was wrong and who was good and who was bad, he picked up the sword."

The best anecdote of the day in this sense came from Neil Sheehan, a member of the early Vietnam War band of brothers who spoke at the memorial.

In Sheehan's account, Halberstam called the US commanding general at home to complain about a lack of access to the action, and the next day was publicly reprimanded by a brigadier general for having done so.

Halberstam became visibly angry, Sheehan recalled, and he declared in a loud voice: "We will disturb the commanding general at home any time we have to do so in order to get our job done. The American public has a right to know what's going on here."

Sheehan paused a minute for dramatic effect and then delivered Halberstam's last line, full of the audacious, cocksure idealism of a 28-year-old who happened to be right. "Is that clear?" Halberstam said.

Sheehan himself subsequently wrote one of the best of the Vietnam books, "A Bright Shining Lie," which tells the story of John Paul Vann, a brilliant US officer who did see how the war was going wrong and strived, unsuccessfully, to inform his superiors.

It is a book that has the power of a Greek tragedy in its depiction of politicians and generals stubbornly persisting in a policy that others know is doomed.

And, of course, the fact that Halberstam died as the country's leaders seem to be doing that in Iraq was not lost on the mourners. Another speaker at the memorial was Dexter Filkins, who spent four years covering the Iraq war for The New York Times. As he took the podium it was almost as if one generation had passed the baton to another.

The reporters in Iraq think about Halberstam in Vietnam, Filkins said.

"When the official version didn't match what we were seeing on the streets of Baghdad, all we had to do—and we did it a lot—was ask ourselves, What would Halberstam have done? And then the way was clear."

Global Witness Used Faulty Methodology

On June 1, Global Witness published a report titled Cambodia's Family Trees that is questionable in its validity and reliability.

First, the methodology used in the study is questionable. One needs to ask, how did Global Witness conduct its investigations. The report failed to discuss its methodology extensively. When the methodology is not clear, it is hard to conclude that the results of the study are valid.

Another shortcoming of the report is that it contains a significant amount of unclear and, as a result, weak references. The report also included and discussed individuals who (if they were asked) might not be happy, willing, or comfortable to participate in the study.

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