



The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War

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"In a grand gesture of reclamation & remembrance, Mr Halberstam has brought the war back home."--*NY Times*

Halberstam's magisterial & thrilling *The Best & the Brightest* was a defining book about the Vietnam conflict. More than three decades later, he used his research & journalistic skills to shed light on another pivotal moment in our history: the Korean War. He considered *The Coldest Winter* his most accomplished work, the culmination of 45 years of writing about America's postwar foreign policy. He gives a masterful narrative of the political decisions & miscalculations on both sides. He charts the disastrous path that led to the massive entry of Chinese forces near the Yalu River & that caught Douglas MacArthur & his soldiers by surprise. He provides vivid & nuanced portraits of all the major figures-Eisenhower, Truman, Acheson, Kim, & Mao, & Generals MacArthur, Almond & Ridgway. At the same time, he provides us with his trademark highly evocative narrative journalism, chronicling the crucial battles with reportage of the highest order. As ever, he was concerned with the extraordinary courage & resolve of people asked to bear an extraordinary burden. *The Coldest Winter* is contemporary history in its most literary & luminescent form, providing crucial perspective on every war America has been involved in since. It's a book that Halberstam first decided to write over 30 years ago that took him nearly a decade to complete. It stands as a lasting testament to one of the greatest journalists & historians of our time, & to the fighting men whose heroism it chronicles.

The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War Details

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From Reader Review The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War for online ebook

Dave Gaston says

For some time, “The Coldest Winter” sat cold on my shelf... winter after winter after winter. Sometimes a title will kill a good book. Finally by default, I was goaded into reading it. Like most middle-aged American's, I knew next to nothing about the Korean War. Of course, Halberstam fixed all that. Thanks to his well told and well edited story, I now have a very good sense of this little, lost war. The Korean War is well worth our attention on several levels. It was the very first in a long, sad line of “Communist” wars following World War II. It was also a non-winnable, unpopular war that was fought far from US soil. Living in 2010 and looking back, this old war of my father's seems way to familiar. Apparently we have learned nothing and therefore, we are once again destined to repeat our selves. Halberstam's gift is telling a crisp, big, broad, international war story while arranging intimate cameos of the main characters both big and small. He adds a certain pluck to his writing and he has some very critical opinions aimed at the arrogant world leaders of the time; MacArthur, Truman, Mao and Kim high among them. Halberstam paints a surprisingly vivid portrait of each of them. Last year I read and loved MacArthur's flag waving hero's manifesto, “American Caesar.” I knew it was unbalanced in it's depiction of MacArthur but I loved it anyway. Within “The Coldest Winter,” it was devilishly fun to hear a liberal author bring Mac down more then a few pegs. Halberstam details the general's last, late, futile and bumbling exit from the theater of war. After enjoying Halberstam's Coldest Winter, I'll need to go back into his achieves, I know I'll strike gold again.

Emilia says

This was a fabulous book. It was written in such a way that kept me engaged, and the author's passion for the story is contagious. So glad read it.

Matt says

In this epic piece, David Halberstam offers a thorough analysis of the Korean War and its effects on America. As is laid out in the introduction, there is little written or produced about the conflict, overshadowed by both the Second World War and Vietnam, bookends of opposing sentiment on America's military capabilities. However, as Halberstam elucidates, this was more than military incursion across the 38th Parallel. It stood to represent much in an era of new ideas, emerging politics, and waning sentiments about the Asian region and its vast land-grab. Halberstam argues the importance of the Korean War through three separate but highly intertwined theatres: the political actors involved on both sides of the Pacific, the inherent political and ideological clashes taking place, and the military battles themselves. Working in concert, they significantly increase the importance of the War, especially to America, and proved a turning point in history, even if it has not been previously explored or argued with such vigour. Halberstam makes his case with strong examples, thorough analysis, and poignant backstories, all to sway the reader to give the Korean War a second examination. This better understanding supports that while temperatures on the open lands plummeted, the importance of this conflict rose exponentially behind the scenes. A fascinating look into a forgotten period that will leave readers in awe.

The 'stage' was set with a number of political actors playing essential roles on either side of the Pacific. The War was not simply about the leaders of North and South Korea, but those who influenced both sides throughout the conflict. Halberstam uses intermittent chapters of the tome to discuss the various backstories and biographies of the key players, offering the reader a more comprehensive look at the larger picture. By doing so, one need not feel parachuted into this war without the necessary context. The highlighted actors come from all walks of life: world leaders, politicians, cabinet officials, military leaders, and soldiers. While the importance of some actors surpasses others, Halberstam does not place anyone on a particular pedestal. Aside from simply denoting the actors and offering insight, Halberstam offers interesting interactions that some faced with one another, which provides telling stories themselves. Most notably, the analysis of the Stalin-Kim Il Sung relationship strengthened the imagery surrounding some of the core reasons for the North's insurgency into the South in June, 1950. One cannot also leave a reading of this book without seeing clashes between Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, which led to the latter's dismissal. The pompous approach taken, between Commander-in-Chief and military mastermind, exemplifies the power this conflict had to create kingmakers and ruin illustrious careers. Perhaps one of the more surprising conflict-filled interactions within key chapters of this piece comes from the Mao-Stalin clashes, showing the different takes on the communist approach, where the latter sought to criticise his ally as a 'peasant-centric leader with little interest in the worker'. With wonderful tales and sentimental pieces to illustrate their states of mind, Halberstam allows the reader to relate to the key players, which provides a better foundation for sentiments going into the War and decisions made during the conflict. Halberstam effectively argues that there were many actors, each playing their specific role, that led to a build-up of tensions before the conflict and whose passions propelled Korea into a war, sustaining it for a significant period of time.

While the Iron Curtain fell during the Cold War, its presence at the centre of the Korean War helps explain the lead-up to key events in the region. The War was the first formal clash between the two Cold War superpowers, pitting Soviet Communism against America's Capitalism. However, as Halberstam argues, there was a rift within the Communist family between Stalin and China's Mao, which supports that this was less a direct Cold War fight, but one between the ideological variants, especially since the Soviets did not actively participate in the conflict by sending troops. Korea was less about the country falling to the communist forces than a delayed chance for America to flex its muscle and offer a stance against Mao's Communist take-over in the Chinese Civil War. Halberstam presents a perspective that Truman sought a chance to voice, both to Congress and the world that America did have an issue with Mao's removal of Chiang Kai-shek. This ideological war grew in importance both on the Cold War level, as well as within the United States, where Truman faced crippling attacks for letting China fall to the Communists. Halberstam shows how Mao's victory and America's failure to stop it fuelled the communist witch hunt in Washington and created great animosity within Republican circles as they sought to rally around a Democratic Party that had been leading the country since 1932. Korea was Truman's (and America's) chance to turn the tables on communism in the region, whose stranglehold was turning the map stronger shades of pink with each passing day. To call the Korean War the first and most important ideological clash in the early years of the Cold War era would not be an exaggeration, as victory would surely solidify a stance in this diametrically opposed World Order.

Bloodshed and highly-choreographed movements on the battlefield played into success and failure for both sides in the conflict. At the heart of the conflict, there were those in the trenches (or open fields) who lost their lives fighting for the cause. Halberstam offers detailed narratives about the battles, the military manoeuvres, and the struggle to justify fighting in the desolate areas of Korea. Weary from intense fighting both in Europe and the Pacific, many in the US military could not understand their role or presence in the region so soon after victory. Troop size was down, morale was tepid, and organisation was top-heavy for the conflict. Korea proved not only to be a misunderstood war, but also one with troops who lacked the vigour to fight. While lines were drawn and ideological stances firm, there was little justification offered troops or the

general public about the need to be there. Even with a weak UN Security Council Resolution, this did not buoy the spirits of the men sent to the region. Add to that, there was a vacuum in the power structure at the top as well, with many generals who had made names for themselves in the Second World War fighting for positions of importance, be it on the ground or in the ivory tower. Halberstam shows how the likes of MacArthur, Ridgeway, and even former greats Marshall and Eisenhower (though fully divorced from the military by now) all had strong stances from a military point of view about the power structure of the military presence in the region. Citing that there were thousands pushing paper in Tokyo while hundreds of men fought to their bloody end along the frozen tundra helps to support that even the US military could not bring itself to staff the war effectively. With a massive Chinese Army holding firm, there did not seem any quick solution to the conflict, but it was resilience and determination that led to a neutralizing of the conflict, where both sides agreed to leave, their blood staining all parts of Korea. Halberstam pulls no punches and does not try to dress up these skirmishes, choosing instead to let the reader act as jury about how those with numerous stars on their shoulders handled directing men against those whose greatest interest was death for country and region. The struggle to justify the war to the American people turned it into 'page ten news' in an era before television news reporting. Though scattered and poorly organised from the top down, the Korean War was a military conflict at its foundation.

As with any significant tome that tackles a collection of historical events, its length is significant and content not always easily digested. Any reader who ventures into this book must do so at their own risk. The content is not superfluous, nor is the discussion found therein. This is surely one of the benefits, as Halberstam offers a sobering look into a conflict that changed so much about America, China, Asia, and the Cold War. While many may look to M*A*S*H as their dose of Korean reality, Halberstam seeks an academic exploration, complete with well-weighted arguments on both sides, as well as an explanation that many history books do not examine. Even as the nuances of battle formations and strategy come into play, the language is such that any reader can process the text with ease, which makes the book all the more inviting. I would surely recommend this to anyone with a passion for history, a curiosity for American politics, and those who enjoy learning a great deal. Powerfully written and sure to be a great addition to bookshelves to offset the supersaturation of analyses from the Second World War and Vietnam.

Kudos, Mr. Halberstam for this extremely powerful piece. I cannot thank you enough for the education you have provided with this sobering tome.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

Owlseyes says

A great piece of investigative journalism, the book presents the testimony of ordinary people, as well as the American leaders and their opponents. David also focus on "the miscalculations" of both sides of the war. Interviewing war veterans adds nobility to those interviewed and to the purpose of the war: freedom.

Right, the "forgotten war"; not for those who fought it, as one of my friends wrote.*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/bo...>

But now, 2017, can History repeat? I mean, those MISCALCULATIONS? whose consequences could be unthinkable; ...unimagined?

Simon Wood says

DID THE EDITOR GO AWOL?

I have a bad or good habit, judge as you will, of pretty much always finishing a book once I've started it. This was tested sorely to the limits with David Halberstams "The Coldest Winter" which I had borrowed from my local Library in the hope of filling in the ample gaps in my knowledge of the Korean War. Instead, within a few score pages, it became apparent that the book had immense and ultimately fatal problems. The fact that there are 650+ pages meant that my reading endurance was tested to its limits.

The amount of clichés is simply astounding as well as a blizzard of trite sound bites, sentimentalism and more than a few dubious judgements. Sentences such as "he passed all kinds of secret tests, and he [Kim Il Sung] was a true believer" appear continuously in the text: the stuff of caricature and they occur with regard to everyone who makes an appearance, from the lowliest soldier to such historical figures as General MacArthur, Harry Truman, Mao and General Ridgeway.

The book is subtitled "America and the Korean War" and I expected that the American contribution to the Korean War would have primacy. What I cannot accept is the utterly miserable amount of space that is given to the Koreans. With the exception of the two leading figures of North and South there is only the odd sentence or paragraph on the Korean people themselves. The reader is left, beyond a few shallow generalities, with little idea of what their experience of the War was. There is not even much in the way of detail regarding how partition happened, or the status of the two Koreas in the period between the end of WW2 and the beginning of the Korean War. The War itself is sometimes glossed over and at other times actions are given in excessive detail, every other soldier seems to get his fifteen cliché ridden sentences of fame.

The analysis at times is a little dubious, for example Truman is quoted as saying "If we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, they won't take any next steps. But if just stand by, they'll move into Iran and they'll take over the whole Middle East." Truman is speaking about what the Soviets will do if he doesn't intervene in Korea, but Halberstam does not think to add that the Soviets never supported the Greek communists and had left Iran four or so years before under a minimal amount of external diplomatic pressure.

The book does have a few saving graces but could have been cut in half, or even more, and been a fairly reasonable account of the Korean War. The lunacy of General MacArthur: his extreme right wing views and the personality cult that surrounded him are clearly stated, as are the tensions in Washington between the Democrat administration and a right wing Republican opposition in the post Chinese Revolution era (with its

endless debates about who lost China) and their McCarthyism in full flow. The abrasive relationship between General MacArthur and the Democrats in Government is made reasonably clear and even at times interesting. The role that the pervasive American racism regarding Asians played in underestimating first the North Korean forces and then the Chinese is a persistent theme, though it is merely explicated as being of "that time".

In brief, I think that this is a book with more than a few interesting points to make but they are few and far between and any reader who undertakes the journey will have to wade through an unbelievable amount of trite quotes and clichés. There must surely be a better general history of the Korean War than this book?

Tony says

This is a book about Heroes and Villains, which is how I prefer my military history served. I enjoyed reading of the criminal negligence of Generals MacArthur and Almond as much as I did about many, many individual acts of bravery by names now permanently etched. Few do heartbreaking as well as Halberstam.

There are weaknesses, to be sure. Halberstam is a writer in need of an editor, someone to tighten up the redundancies and to fix a syntax which is, well, gnarly. Sometimes there are little hints that he wants to be one of the guys, such as when he uses "demob" as a noun instead of demobilization. Moreover, *The Coldest Winter* runs out of steam with the cashing of MacArthur; so it is hardly comprehensive, notwithstanding its girth.

I've come to expect all that with Halberstam who is more journalist than historian. He tells great stories, has a keen eye for injustice, and tries really hard to get the big picture right, even if he couldn't survive a spot-checker. I really like reading Halberstam. It's sad that he's gone.

People generally are defined by how they live, not by how they die. Halberstam died in a freak car accident seven days after putting *The Coldest Winter* to bed. He was going to interview Y.A. Tittle for a book about football.

Which is my windy way of saying: there may be better books out there about the Korean War, but none will be told with Halberstam's joy and sadness. I'm glad he took me there.

Oh. And it's a really cool cover.

Wayne Barrett says

3.5

I would really love to rate this book higher. If not for the honor and memory it brings to those who served in Korea then for the details about the war that I learned. I would love to, but I won't because yes, I learned a lot, but the dry style in which this book was written made it a task to trudge through.

The Korean War has been called "the forgotten war" and it was for that reason I sought out a book on the subject. I was talking with a cousin recently about an uncle of ours who had passed and he reminded me that he had served in the Korean War. As much as I think I know about other American wars, I realized I know next to nothing about the Korean War.

The soldiers who served in that conflict coined the phrase "die for a tie" and that's probably the perception that most have about the outcome of the war. We didn't lose, but we didn't win. As for my opinion, as well as others I've heard and read, I think it depends on your perspective of the outcome. No, we didn't conquer Korea and have their leaders surrender to us, but then again, taking over North Korea was never our objective to begin with. North Korea invaded our ally, South Korea with intent to possess it and we prevented that from happening, so they failed, we succeeded.

I feel for those who served there because now that I have learned more about this war, I believe there was some of the most brutal battles, conditions, and valiant acts by our soldiers than almost any other war. We don't know about them because there was no great victory parades, accolades, and televised media did not take off until the Vietnam War. Most Americans knew nothing about the details of the war and probably didn't want to.

If you don't believe the Korean War, 1950-1953, was a forgotten war, ask yourself this; how many movies about the war can you name. I can help you with that because if you don't count the TV series "Mash" there are zero. I'm sure there's no interest in portraying how absolutely negligent and irresponsible our command leadership was during that war. Especially when it involved a WWII hero, General MacArthur, who turned out to be a self serving egomaniac.

So, anyway, now I know. I really did learn a ton more than I ever knew, I just wish the story had been served with a little more heart.

Mike says

The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War gets a **4 Star rating** in the end. I so wanted it to be 5 Stars but could not get there. Halberstam is one of my most admired authors but I had some problems with this book. This book covers the lead up to the start of the Korean War, the geopolitical arena and the US domestic situation impacting the war. This book ends with the firing of MacArthur with a short postscript on the consequences of that action. First the good stuff.

Halberstam really stands out as he covers the tactical and operational levels of the war. He spends a great deal of time discussing the various commanders and staffs, how they are organized and how well or how poorly they performed. He also spends time down at the infantryman level, bringing the war to its lowest common denominator. Here are two accounts of the fighting near Chipyongni, where the UN forces finally stopped the southern thrusts of the Chinese after the terrible ambushes and retreats up north at the Chosin Reservoir and Kunuri. The first account is of a brave BAR man holding off the Chinese attackers:

(view spoiler)

The second account is about a platoon a short time later in the same area, fighting to hold what was later known as McGee's Hill:

(view spoiler)

You will see some incredible stupidity and arrogance in the beginning of the war. It was shocking to see how poorly the forces performed a short 4.5 years after winning WWII. Halberstam highlights many of the incompetent commanders, as well as some of the good ones. You will be alternately pissed off or amazed at various players. His accounts of the 8th Army's retreat on the western side of North Korea illuminates a lesser known part of the intervention of the Chinese Army. He spends much less time on the far better known Chosin Reservoir battles.

The main conflict between MacArthur and Truman is not well covered in my view. Halberstam seems to excuse Truman's actions at every point while he paints MacArthur as a truly vile person. Perhaps he was, I am certainly no fan. I came away with the impression Halberstam was making every excuse possible for Truman's inaction with MacArthur.

The worst part of the book was the liberal agenda Halberstam clearly brings to his discussion of domestic politics in the era. Every Republican is a vile, animalistic, bombastic, shallow, opportunistic and stupid right winger while every Democrat is a thoughtful, honest, selfless, calm, mainstream, small town patriot. His effort to blame the start of the Korean War on the Republicans was so intense that I practically expected him to say "it's George Bush's fault"! And then he brought George Bush into the discussion! No sh#!t! After a long section showing how MacArthur's intelligence chief lied and misrepresented indications of Chinese intervention into Korea, Halberstam states Bush did the same thing in Iraq. Halberstam clearly has an agenda in this book that did not need to be there. I have read many of his books and this is the first one where I thought he slanted his accounts for a personal vendetta. I was sad to see this.

His epilogue is intriguing because he starts to connect the Democratic Party defensive posture on "losing China", the Korean War and the initial stages of Kennedy's escalation into Vietnam, followed by Johnson's actions. Only a few pages of this. I wanted more, connecting his seminal "The Best and the Brightest" with this earlier conflict. Sadly, this is only briefly covered.

South Korea is a place you either love or don't. I love it, having been stationed there and traveled the length and breadth of the southern half of the peninsula. Did it at slow speed and low altitude in my OV-10 and also on the ground. This addition to the shamefully small Korean War anthology is well worth your time and will help understand how we got involved and why things went as they did.

Hadrian says

Halberstam's prose is workmanlike, but he still tells quite the story. The book benefits most from interviews with ordinary soldiers.

Jerome says

Although Halberstam's insights are repetitive, the book is interesting and quite readable. He makes a lot of judgment calls that you may or may not agree with, but I found him pretty persuasive. And many of his insights into the motivations and objectives of all sides are penetrating and illuminating.

Halberstam provides an illuminating and insightful portrait of Douglas MacArthur, who doesn't come off too well as the narrative progresses. MacArthur had an amazing capacity for deception and a huge ego. He didn't even ask his superiors or subordinates questions simply because it would imply that there was something he didn't know, and he frequently took credit for the successes of others. He had a split personality: a man of great talent whose agenda was almost always in conflict with that of his superiors, a jealous guarder of information. He was contemptuous of the Joint Chiefs and couldn't care less about their views. He comes across as a vain, manipulative dinosaur, and he even manipulated the intelligence he reported to Washington just to get what he wanted.

Halberstam's focus is on the main players of the war: MacArthur, Ridgway, Truman, Acheson, etc. However, he also addresses many topics from all levels of the hierarchy, and moves back and forth very smoothly. He also addresses the actions of the misguided China Lobby (who accused the Democrats of "losing" China, as if America could impose its will on a nation three times its size on the other side of the planet), and the self-appointed Commie-hunter Joe McCarthy, who ruined reputations and imagined his facts.

I also enjoyed Halberstam's addition of the perspective of the Russians, the Chinese, and the North Koreans. As Americans we tend to view all our wars as exclusively American experiences; in our popular imagination, the other side always gets demonized, and in the scholarly and academic field, they are typically ignored. I think this is why our military failures are always so politically charged: we always look for scapegoats and traitors on our side and wonder why we lost; rarely do we consider why or how the other side won. China did not welcome the outbreak of war in Korea, and intervened only with the greatest reluctance. They had originally intended North Korea to be a buffer state only. The Chinese could easily deploy an army four times that of the US forces in Korea, and their troops were well-disciplined. But when they did intervene, China made several poor decisions that got thousands of their men needlessly killed: they ignored the inadequacy of their volunteer forces, who had almost no artillery, haphazard, ill-suited logistics system, and a rigid, inflexible command structure, and they were extremely vulnerable to US airpower. China suffered horrific casualties during the war. While the Chinese commander Peng Dehuai was a competent professional officer, he eventually met his demise during the "Great Leap Forward", where his country repaid him for his service by arresting him and beating him to death. Peng had tried to expose the falsified statistics that made up the optimistic reporting on the "Leap" (which, of course, was actually a disaster), and that was how the regime repaid him.

Kim Il Sung, on the other hand, comes off as an incompetent, vainglorious, erratic and insecure oaf. The Chinese had little respect for him; he was easy to flatter, and quite arrogant and brash. He was an ardent nationalist and an ardent communist at the same time, seeing no contradiction in those twin beliefs.

US policymakers viewed the communist bloc as a monolithic entity brought together by shared ideology, but nothing could have been further from the truth. The Soviets and Chinese jockeyed for power in the peninsula

and tried to undermine each others' influence. Also, they viewed Kim Il-Sung as a junior partner. Before the war broke out, Stalin had never viewed Mao and the Chinese communists as allies, only as threats. And the Soviets were actually quite satisfied with the course of the war: MacArthur's drive to the Yalu threatened their Chinese rivals, and the Soviets could sit on the sidelines as their two rivals got sucked into a seemingly endless land war on the Asian landmass.

Many US officers also underestimated the fighting ability of the Chinese. In the early phase of the war, US troops were in horrible condition, and in no shape to fight a major war. North Korean troops, on the other hand, were battle-hardened, well-motivated, and extremely well-disciplined. North Korean soldiers had very little need for extra gear, while US troops carried a considerable load of it.

However, while Halberstam provides good coverage of the other side, he provides little on the allied troops of the US during the war, such the British or French. There are also a few errors: he writes about B-17's being on ground and destroyed during the initial attack on Wake Island --It should have been Clark Field. There were no B-17's on Wake, and Wake did not have serious attack until several days after Pearl Harbor. Plus Halberstam transposes the December 8 Japanese strike on MacArthur's air force at Clark Field in the Philippines to Wake Island! That's a pretty fantastic error. But in, all, a superb book.

Horace Derwent says

huh!

today, again i read a brainwashing review and some retarded comments from some mindwarped morons, which were about this lamentable period of history

all the same, said that rhee syngman stirred this up, he who started the war and made this turmoil, said that it was in the name of justice that mau tsetung sent People's Volunteer Army to support (aw, just another dictator and butcher) kim ilsung to fight against American Imperialists' invasion

i told them to have fried rice with egg with the crown prince mao anying, better in a mountain cave, laugh if you understand what my insinuation was :D

oh, i just forgot, he and his father are now both in the shitpool in HELL

Sweetwilliam says

This is a must read. I liked it so much that I bought it twice. The 2nd time I purchased Coldest Winter was after I left my first copy on a plane on a flight returning from Brazil. Watch out as it is liable to make you angry, however. Why? First, how could the US give so much money and support to China's Chiang Ki Shek and get so little in return when it was obvious he was an incompetent thief? The end result was to supply Red China with all the equipment that Chang's forces surrendered which were used against the US in Korea. Second, how can a US statesman be so careless with his public comments to make the communists believe that the US would not defend South Korea in the first place? Third, how can the US go into the Korean War so unprepared? After his success at Inchon, how could MacArthur (who never spent a single night in Korea) be so arrogant to ignore all the intelligence that indicated that the Chinese would enter the war? MacArthur

insisted all units continue on the offensive and ignore the obvious. The book teaches about heroes such as Marine general O.P. Smith who saved the first Marine Division and maybe all of X Corp from total destruction in the Chosin Reservoir. The 1st Mar Div was spared because Smith disobeyed orders from MacArthur's incompetent sycophant Edward Almond and concentrated his forces. Meanwhile, the Army units were sacrificed. Finally, MacArthur was sacked in favor of Ridgeway. If you are Chinese, you will be angry that your man-God Mao was so eager to sacrifice 1.5 MM casualties to stop the Americans in Korea. Meanwhile, Mao kept busy by sleeping with the teenage girl of his choice at every village he visited. Furthermore, Halberstam explains that the Democrats, who had a lock on the presidency for several years finally lost it due to political fallout from losing China to communism and the Korean War. He draws parallels to the US involvement in Vietnam which was politically motivated so that the Democrats could counter republican rhetoric by demonstrating that they were doing something to combat communism in Asia.

Years later, the reader can decide for themselves if the 33,000 US casualties in Korea were worth it. Halberstam points out the stark contrast between the bustling economy in South Korean and the isolated North Korea, barely able to feed itself and the failure of communism in the Soviet Union and China. The book is a testament to why parents should be leery of allowing their children to volunteer in the US armed forces so they can be used as the expendable pawns that they are while politicians seek reelection.

Lawyer says

David Halberstam's The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War

Should you read any history of the Korean War it should be The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War by David Halberstam. It was Halberstam's last book. Shortly after publication, Halberstam was killed in an automobile accident April 23, 2007. He was on his way to interview a subject for his next book.

Lest the reader pick up this volume thinking it is a history of the complete Korean War, it is not. It is a masterful treatment of the background of the War and its principal players. Here are careful portraits of the division of the Korean peninsula into North and South following the end of World War II, the respective leaders, Kim Il Sung, indoctrinated by the Soviets during World War II, and Syngman Rhee, considered friendly to the United States. Throw in detailed sketches of Dean Acheson and Averell Harriman, original Cold War warriors for the United States, and Harry Truman in his second term as President, the man underestimated by his political opponents. Most of all, General Douglas MacArthur seems to tower over them all, the Supreme Commander in World War II's Pacific Theater, and America's ruler of Occupied Japan from his headquarters in the Dai Ichi.

But Korea was long ignored by the United States. MacArthur considered the country to be the problem of the State Department, not an issue of his concern. He was wrong. As time passed he would realize how wrong he was, but he would not accept responsibility for his errors. Rather he would attack the Truman Administration for not having fulfilled his request for more support and permission to widen the war that began in June, 1950, with an attack by North Korean forces across the Thirty-Eighth Parallel that caught the South Korean government and United States by surprise.

North Korean forces threatened to push American troops off the Korean Peninsula at Pusan. It was a war of strategic mistakes, divided commands, largely the responsibility of Ned Almond, a MacArthur man. Almond primarily attempted to wage war by surveying maps rather than studying the actual terrain which favored

North Korean forces. McArthur waged war from his headquarters in Japan. He never spent an entire day in Korea while in command. American casualties were horrific.

An American defeat was avoided by McArthur's last hurrah. An amphibious landing at Inchon, behind the North Korean forces who had cornered American troops far south in the area of Pusan. The North Korean Assault was halted. American commands pushed the North Koreans back beyond the Thirty-Eighth Parallel. McArthur planned an American drive all the way to the Yalu River on the Manchurian Border.

McArthur promised the war would be over by Christmas and American boys would be coming home. In Washington the Administration was worried about intervention by Mao's Communist Chinese. Intelligence reports indicated massive Chinese Divisions forming along the Yalu River.

But McArthur only believed in truth as he decided it should be. The Chinese would not intervene.

American forces continued to race North. McArthur's head of Intelligence, Charles Willoughby, suppressed information of the Chinese presence. Nor was Washington any the wiser of the presence of Chinese forces. If there is a villain of the Korean War, Willoughby is one. A colleague, knowing of Willoughby's deception said Willoughby should be in jail.

On October 25 and 26, 1950, Chinese forces actively intervened, carving up American Units. Many American troops fought in summer uniforms. They were equipped with bazookas incapable of piercing the armor of Soviet T-34 tanks. The treads of American Sherman tanks froze to the ground. Soldier's carbines and M-1 rifles locked in the cold. Willoughby continued to suppress information about Chinese intervention. Division Commanders on the ground insisted they knew a Chinese when they saw one. They were ignored.

The secret presence of Chinese troops could not be kept. Not by Willoughby or McArthur. No, the troops would not be home for Christmas. McArthur argued that a widened war was absolutely essential, proposing an invasion of China and the use of atomic weapons if necessary.

McArthur's political thrusts against the Truman Administration that his hands were tied by Democrats who wanted to fight a war of appeasement ultimately led to his recall by Truman. McArthur never seemed to grasp that America was no longer alone in the nuclear age. The Soviets had successfully exploded their first atomic device in 1949.

Some military histories can be remarkably dry. David Halberstam never wrote anything that was a turgid stream of facts. This is an exceptional book filled with the stories of men, heroes and cowards both. And as with any good history, it has its lessons. It leads us to the frightening conclusion that Kim Jong-Un is the grandson of the man who launched the surprise attack on South Korea in June, 1950. There will be no easy answers to today's problems on the Korean Peninsula.

Highly recommended.

Terry says

If you're interested in the origins of the "Cold War," if you've never read anything about the Korean War, if you have little knowledge of the people who made the decisions that determined how the world got into the mess it's in in the latter half of the 20th Century you should probably read this book. It synthesizes much of what you would read in a whole bookshelf of political history. When North Korea's army crossed the 38th parallel in June 1950 the American Army that was supposed to be able to defend the country was as unprepared as any this nation had ever fielded. The U.S. troops in occupied Japan were poorly trained and equipped with worn out, out of date weapons from WWII. They were poorly led as well by officers who expected little from them and went along at least nominally, with the notion, promulgated by civilian authorities who drastically cut military budgets, that soldiers were nearly unnecessary in a world of nuclear weapons. The reality of how wrong that notion was, that presented itself in the horrible, cold winter of 1950-51 on the Korean peninsula, had repercussions that we still live with today. Douglas MacArthur's reputation as a "great" military leader has been under scrutiny for several decades. This book does him no favors. However, it like other studies of the man, make us question the judgement of leaders who had the ability to remove him but continued to keep him in place and the system that let it all happen. David Halberstam will be missed in the future; he pulled together the essentials of whatever he was writing about whether it was Rock n'Roll or War. He wasn't afraid to state an opinion nor did he neglect to defend it with facts.

John says

Any book that fills the void of our knowledge concerning the Korean War is a welcome addition to any library. There are too few available and on that basis I would recommend this one. It is well written, easy to read and for the general public disgorges a wealth of information, although to some critics, nothing new and therefore disappointing.

Essentially, Halberstam launches a scathing and deserved attack on MacArthur and Gen. Ned Almond. From the very first sentence of Part 1, he blames MacArthur for the War, continues his attack non-stop throughout the remainder of the book and does it with great fervor. And yet, shouldering these faults, MacArthur's brilliant landing at Inchon ranks on a par with Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, Genghis Khan, Von Manstein, Jackson, Allenby and others.and yes he should have bypassed Seoul.

The author lost his focus too, I thought, when he rambled on and on with all the biographical material about MacArthur and his family. For that I could have read a different book.

In only fleeting glimpses does he ascribe any fault to Truman and then leaves these comments exposed with no substantive development. This is where I was most discouraged as I was expecting a more objective portrayal of all participants. Where Clay Blair in "The Forgotten War" levels criticism at Truman and MacArthur, Halberstam simply cannot bring himself to realistically criticize Truman.

The United States went to war totally unprepared and the first hint of responsibility for the President comes on page 138 where Halberstam, in a paragraph, finally acknowledges that Truman must assume full responsibility. Truman harbored a visceral distrust and dislike of men in uniform and worked diligently to slash manpower and materiel levels after WWII.

He was afraid to call the War, a war. "No, we are not at war" "This is a police action" He was afraid of MacArthur. Early in his presidency, he twice ordered MacArthur to report to him and MacArthur refused by claiming he was too busy. Truman did nothing. When Truman was advised by John Foster Dulles, a republican, to get rid of MacArthur, Halberstam informs us that "He (Truman) feared replacing MacArthur for political reasons" This was gross insubordination on MacArthur's part; he should have been relieved on the spot. And gross negligence on Truman's part, buck passing at its finest. More than twenty pages are

devoted near the end of the book to justify relieving MacArthur of his command. After 6 years replete with instances of insubordination, no justification was necessary.

Here is a revelation Halberstam missed. Page 786 of "Truman" (hardcover) by David McCullough. Shortly after the war started and US forces suffering heavy losses McCullough writes: "He, (Truman), was also fed up with the way reporters spilled ink from their fountain pens on the rug in his office" What a tragic juxtaposition!! While American soldiers are spilling their blood and guts on the soil of the Korean frontier, Truman is worried about ink spilling on his carpet!!!

MacArthur was an egotistical desk general and it is unconscionable that as Commander he never spent a single night on the Korean peninsula; he should have been relieved long before he actually was. Regrettably, he was no Eisenhower.

Truman was little more than a provincial police chief. Regrettably, he was no Roosevelt.

How did our Nation survive these two during this crises? It survived in spite of them by the actions of valiant small unit commanders and the brave and courageous men that served under them but at a huge, huge cost!

From a Former Officer who served with the 2nd Infantry in Korea but not during the war I render a salute to Korean War Veterans everywhere:

"All gave some
Some gave all"

Scott Hitchcock says

4.5*'s

If you have no knowledge of the Korean War this is a complete accounting from all perspectives including all of the political agendas not only from the American POV but also the Russian, Chinese, North and South Korean.

I thought from the title of the book it was going to be more about the battles and struggles in country. Because I already know a lot about the politics of the war I liked those parts a lot more but recognize to tell the full story you have to tell the political story because it was a political war. I simply feel the title is a bit misleading in this regard. Having recently read a book on Ike's political career and both Kennedy's the political side had been covered ad nauseum for me.

One part of the political portion that was fairly new for me was the dismantling of the myth of MacArthur. Some of his brilliance in WWII and Inchon diminished by his petty autocratic methods and where he rewrote the facts to display his intended outcome which by extension lost thousands of lives because of his ego. The parallel Truman drew between McClellan and Lincoln with MacArthur and himself really bearing out having recently read Grant.

I think finally if you want to understand how North Korea got to where it is today reading about the father in this conflict and subsequent events and then handing off power to his son as an autocratic dictator where all culture is directed to the leader is amazing.

Dave says

I picked up this book as the Korean War was something I'd never really taken the time to investigate, while my interest in history lay mainly in the Second World War and before that. I had seen on Goodreads that it had a great reputation, and came highly recommended, and I thought that it was a good introduction to the Korean War. I had never read any of Halberstam's other books, but that's not uncommon in non-fiction circles.

My main issue with the book was that it is a book of big things, of grand sweeping gestures, of the big people in the Korean War. The primary players being General Douglas MacArthur and Harry Truman. So much of this book is devoted to the political machinations and failures of leadership both at a military and a political level.

The thing that bothered me the most in retrospect was the Afterword to the book, wherein David Halberstam's virtues as an interviewer are extolled. Be that as it may, the personal stories is precisely what I felt was missing from the book.

Halberstam opens the book with a battle scene, and I felt as though I was right in there in the action. GREAT! But then he almost immediately cuts away (in movie terms) to a long and extensive description of the history of South East Asia, the MacArthur family, and sundry other matters which are relevant, yes, but their position at this point is questionable at best.

The author spends an enormous amount of space detailing the continuous and overwhelming litany of failures that led to the abysmal situation that existed in Korea. The failure of people on all sides to accept that the Chinese firstly were in country, and were there in force. MacArthur's obstinacy and failures as a collaborative commander, and the fraternal appointment of useless officers over competent and capable ones, purely out of personal loyalty.

There are some very interesting little people in the war, people such as Paul Macghee. But the telling of these stories gets lost as Halberstam clearly uses these to leverage into his true argument regarding the macro-level management of the war. While it is told in a mostly-chronological form,

One of the biggest failings I found with the book was the way that Halberstam tended to in large ignore, or describe only in the vaguest terms, the actual fighting. Yes there were a few choice narratives regarding particular battles, but he tended to skip over the actual events, and concentrate on the aftermath, or political fallout.

One that particularly springs to mind was the relief column sent to save the American forces engaged at Chipyong-ni. Halberstam goes into great detail about the setup of that, and how much the officers involved would regret doing this, or that, the dangers of putting the soldiers on top of tanks, etc etc. Then he glosses over what happened on the way, and talks about the aftermath, the horrendous loss of life, and the military fallout. This left me asking aloud "So what the F**K actually happened?" He was far too eager to cut away to the bitch fighting between the senior generals and officers.

I found it difficult to tell when things were happening in relation to others. He also proceeds to gloss over the second half of the conflict, resorting to making oblique references to ongoing fighting and skirmishes, and these were the nails in the coffin which got it into my head what the book was truly about.

If you knew nothing else about the conduct of the Korean War, from reading this book, you might walk away with the idea that the United States did not have a navy or an air force. Halberstam talks about the Chinese trying to obtain air support from Russia, and talks repeatedly about US air superiority. But whenever Halberstam mentions the Air Force, they are always "unavailable" or "engaged elsewhere" or "providing support to another unit". Which left me begging the question... what else is going on in this place that he's not telling me about?

The Korean War was really the dawn of the jet age, with the first serious dogfighting between jet air craft. Yes, this might not have fit nicely into Halberstam's grand overview of the whole thing, but come on? I wanted to know about Mig Alley, about the air war. Surely it's an iconic enough part of history to warrant a mention.

This is a book which is only secondarily related to actual warfare, and people looking for a book which actually tells the story of the fighting man on the ground should probably look elsewhere. This is a book about the politics of war, and the wars of politics which go on behind the scenes in any conflict. The battle between Macarthur trying to maintain his independence (either through vainglory, or arrogance) from the civilian government is Halberstam's central interest in this book, and to what he devotes most of the 700+ pages.

While I recognise that he was an American author, and the war was primarily conducted by Americans, it was a United Nations force which was fighting there, and as an Australian, I think it's a little disingenuous to those other countries who were there also.

As a political science book, this is instructive and frightening. Some time ago I read a book regarding the first world war, which was in a similar vein, and it is apparent that little was learned between these two wars. When I read a book about a war, though, I would like to think it would devote more time to the actual war.

Matt says

I like the idea of David Halberstam more than his books. I liked the fact that a well-educated, erudite journalist with diverse interests lived in this world, writing big, messy, sprawling books about those interests, whether they be Vietnam, the Portland Trailblazers, or a single firehouse. Unfortunately, I've never really liked his books.

Halberstam is famous for his style, which really isn't a style at all. His writing has been called "workmanlike," which is to say it is skillful, but not *that* skillful. He is known for those long, repetitive, oblique sentences, such as that famous opening to *The Best and the Brightest*. In *The Coldest Winter*, Halberstam turns his researching and interviewing skills to the Korean War. The result is a big, confusing book.

The story starts after the invasion, and then sort of loops back to tell us what happened. Throughout the book he intercuts between matters on the ground, in Korea, and the political arena in Washington D.C. Such intercutting can work just fine; here, though, it makes for a muddle. Then, instead of finishing his story,

describing the stalemate between 1951-53, during which time several major battles occurs, Halberstam just ends the book. He gives a brief overview about what happened, but really, in essence, he just stops telling the story. This is a book about The Korean War.

Halberstam has always been masterful at fleshing out a historical personage. Indeed, I sort of thought *The Best and the Brightest* was one long character notebook, in which Halberstam told us about the lives of various Harvard and Yale grads. This ability is put to good use here:

"He was born Kim Song Ju in the village of Nam-ri on April 15, 1912, just two years after the Japanese began their colonial era in Korea. If one imagines some child of modern Europe growing up in Holland or France under a Nazi occupation that lasted for the first thirty-three years of his life, Kim's anger and his rigidity can be better understood."

Halberstam strains hard to evoke the vividness of combat. In *The Best and the Brightest*, Halberstam wrote about the Vietnam War without ever mentioning the existence of a war. Here, he dives right into combat, using a wealth of personal anecdotes. These scenes, though, are incredibly dry. His sources, the men on the ground who fought the North Koreans and Chinese, are understated by nature and profession. Halberstam, for whatever reason, tends to mimic that understatement.

"[T]he Chinese struck in force. It was like suddenly hitting a brick wall, Paik later wrote. At first the ROK commanders had no idea what had happened. Paik's Fifteenth Regiment came to a complete halt under a withering barrage of mortar fire, after which the Twelfth Regiment on its left was hammered, and then his Eleventh Regiment, the division reserve, was hit on its flank and attacked from the rear. The enemy was clearly fighting with great skill. Paik thought it must be Chinese. He reacted by reflex, and thereby probably saved most of his men. He immediately pulled the division back to the village of Unsan. It was, he said, like a scene from an American Western, when the white folks, hit by Indians and badly outnumbered, circled the wagons. His division had walked into a giant ambush set by the Chinese."

Yawn. I don't know why Halberstam's retelling is so lifeless. Perhaps it's the astronomical number of commas he uses, breaking every sentence up into four or five or six clauses. It also doesn't help that his most interesting characters, a number of intrepid young American officers, appear, disappear, then reappear much later, so that when you are with them in their defining moments, you've already forgotten who they are.

For me, the most enjoyable part of this book is the trashing of Our Lord and Savior Douglas MacArthur. A lot of conservative critics have complained that much of the book is dedicated to this pursuit. Indeed, Halberstam does end his mammoth telling shortly after MacArthur is sacked by Truman. Still, it is deserved.

MacArthur was a vainglorious, pompous, pretentious, incapable ponce. This has been shown and proven by countless historians. Not even William Manchester could save his reputation, though he devoted 800 florid pages to trying. MacArthur screwed up every which way in his career. He blew it in the Philippines, when he ignored warnings of an impending attack, and allowed his planes to be blown up on the runway long after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He showed it in his unwillingness to prep the Philippines for a Japanese invasion, believing they could never get within range without his airplanes spotting them. Then, after his mistakes

forced his men into Corregidor, he snuck out in the dead of night, leaving John Wainwright and 70,000 American soldiers to march to Bataan. To double down on idiocy, he forced the Americans to recapture the Philippines, even though it was a sideshow to the actual strategy of island-hopping to Japan. In the first moments of the Korean War, MacArthur was to have said "All is lost."

American Caesar indeed!

MacArthur, of course, scored a coup at Inchon. Then he blundered his way towards the Yalu, let his men get cut to pieces by the Chinese - whom Mac said would never enter the war - then tried to get Truman to drop atomic bombs. And this man is a hero and icon? He makes a mistake and to cover it up, tries to nuke a billion Chinamen? Class act.

MacArthur was a dangerous man. He thought himself a god (which was probably why he did so well in postwar Japan, amongst people who believed in divine emperors. If Truman hadn't fired him, it probably would've become the greatest constitutional crisis since the Civil War.

I also ruefully enjoyed the takedown of MacArthur's staff. His chief intelligence officer, Willoughby, was frighteningly creepy. I could read between the lines with him...but no. Then there's Ned Almond, who acquitted himself fine in World War II, then turned out to be an incompetent, virulently racist bozo in Korea. I laughed aloud when Almond went to the front to see the troops, and berated a soldier for chopping wood incorrectly.

There is a definite left-of-center slant to all Halberstam's work. And to be fair, there are quite enough right-of-center books that tell us we could have won the Vietnam War, or that MacArthur would have redeemed himself in Korea if Truman hadn't fired him. An author's political perspective, right or left, should always be kept in mind. Yet I think here, in one major way, Halberstam's point-of-view betrayed him. I'm speaking of the reason why he abruptly ended his book where he did. This leaves the impression that all was a mess in Korea, and that America had been thoroughly trounced. This just isn't the case.

American soldiers said they were in Korea to "die for a tie." In reality, though, we could've come out of this much worse. The original North Korean invasion could've wrested all South Korea into the Communist sphere. Instead, under Ridgeway and Eisenhower, the stalemate led to a return to the status quo antebellum. It showed the Communist world that we'd fight to protect our satellites. And it caused a nice big rift between the USSR and China.

On the other hand, we can't exactly say we solved the problem with North Korea, can we?

Robert French says

The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War is the first book I have read by David Halberstam. I was surprised by how much the book resonated with me, perhaps because many of important political and military players would be part of my life as I grew up. I kept remembering all those names: Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, George Kennan, Douglas MacArthur, George Marshall, Syngman Rhee, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin and many more. Perhaps I had particularly good social studies and history teachers when I attended school in Idaho during the 50s and early 60s.

I was pleased with and quite impressed with The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War and

particularly liked the depth with which Halberstam described the major political and military participants. Often books about a war deal primarily with the warriors and battles, but the background information about the important players I found absolutely fascinating. Ironically I have only recently started reading about the bizarre hermit kingdom of North Korea and Kim Il-sung and his dynasty including Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-un. Part of this interest stems from my recent reading of *A Kim Jong-Il Production: The Extraordinary True Story of a Kidnapped Filmmaker, His Star Actress, and a Young Dictator's Rise to Power*. Kim Jong-un of course is making outrageous news as I write.

It was a long book and time consuming to read as I was often cross referencing the geography and references to historical figures and military units. In many ways I wish the book had been longer, perhaps with more background on the United Nations and the participation of other combat forces in the United Nations Command. It would also have been interesting to have had more background on North and South Korea (although perhaps difficult to research and definitely to interview participants). But, I have no real complaints. Without question I thoroughly enjoyed *The Coldest Winter* and am now looking forward to reading *The Best and the Brightest*.

Erik Graff says

Another excellent book by Halberstam and, sadly, his last. Although giving an overview of the Korean War of 1950-53, most of the text concerns the first months of the war, the violent back-and-forth between communist and U.N. forces. Although some mention is made of politics of Korea, its two dictators and two armies, much more attention is paid the real actors, the militaries of the U.S.A. and of People's China. In the background, of course, is General Douglas MacArthur, locked in his losing struggles with Chairman Mao Zedong and President Harry Truman. In the foreground are a number of very detailed accounts of particularly representative battles substantially based on interviews with surviving American combatants. Overall, an impressionistic account with relevance to American political and military history.
