

## Essential Wartime Reading

By Daniel Born

“But their image was of virility; they played squash and handball to stay in shape, wrote books and won prizes (even the President had won a Pulitzer prize), climbed mountains to clear their minds. Many of them read poetry and some were said to be able to quote it.”

—David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972)

WHAT SHOULD WE READ during wartime? My book group has started a long campaign of massive Victorian novels, which will take us roughly through the end of spring. Best of all, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Thomas Hardy’s last and maybe greatest work of fiction, is on the list. Not to give anything away, but the dramatic climax occurs when young Jude, who is more bookworm than party animal, makes the drunken choice to sleep with a barmaid. One understands his desire and his decision, because Hardy lets us in on Jude’s troubled past. One also understands that at the moment Arabella leads him up the staircase to her chamber, he bids happiness a permanent goodbye and welcomes disaster.

Many of us these days are thinking, however, about real, not fictional disaster, the kind happening on a large and ghastly scale. I speak of a war in which the thrill of “Mission Accomplished” has drowned under spouting fountains of Iraqi and American blood. Awareness of this mounting death toll brings out another side of my reading self. Call him the amateur citizen-thinker who reads history, the sap who still

believes that hoary aphorism about how those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it. Such a belief might be understood as a venerable form of the impulse toward self-help. It is naïve and optimistic, but I claim it as an American. We read history so that we might help to head off the next fiasco.

There are few better books to start with than Barbara Tuchman’s 1984 bestseller, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*. I say that with a caveat because Tuchman’s highly praised book suffers from the fallacy of ex post facto wisdom. She catalogs a variety of public policy disasters and argues that they could have been averted if only reason had prevailed. The Trojans accepted a gift horse. The British tried to subdue the American colonies with military power. The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The United States wasted blood and treasure, and killed thousands of Vietnamese civilians over a 20-plus-year period of time. Tuchman asks: “Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process seem so

often not to function?” Let me give a short answer: because at the time they are making the choice or implementing the policy, a reasonable case can be made that it *is* in their self-interest. Only hindsight reveals otherwise. Reading Tuchman, I am reminded of that adage about economists: they’re so much better at predicting the past than they are the future.

But it’s worth staying with Tuchman, because her book gets smarter and more interesting as she works through her criteria for defining foolish decisions and concentrates on the details of each historical case study. Her criteria are clear. In the first, she anticipates the charge of Monday-morning quarterbacking when she says the folly “must have been perceived as counterproductive in its own time, not merely in hindsight.” (Of course this invites the question, perceived *by whom* as counter-productive? How many voices were raised against the impending disaster, and did they get a hearing?) The second criterion is that “a feasible alternative course of action must have been available.” And third, “the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime. Misgovernment by a single sovereign or tyrant is too frequent and too individual to be worth a generalized inquiry.”

Tuchman’s ideas should be central to any consideration of the two American military misadventures that loom in our own lifetime: Vietnam, and now Iraq. And two books that help grasp how these blunders evolved are David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) and James Mann’s *The Rise of the Vulcans* (2004). Both are works in the genre of group biography, an important

literary form especially useful in showing how the creative spark that leads to an idea, instead of springing from a single authorial self, builds a charge as it passes along a network of associated individuals. Halberstam’s book provides an account of John

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F. Kennedy’s wonder boys, mostly products of the best prep schools and the Ivy League, all wicked smart, some absolutely brilliant. Well-read? I won’t belabor the obvious. Authors, too, and as Halberstam notes, they weren’t averse to showing off their command of poetry. These men bear responsibility as the architects of the debacle in Vietnam.

Mann’s book follows a similar blueprint, interlacing biographical sketches of the principal “Vulcans” (a self-designated label inspired by a statue in Condoleeza Rice’s hometown of Birmingham, Alabama), with the events leading up to and including the early phase of the war in Iraq. These are the people who succeeded in making the case to Congress and the American people for invading and occupying Iraq under the new doctrine of pre-emptive war. (One more counterpoint to Tuchman: what both books reveal is that

the decision to intervene militarily is going to be articulated as rational; war almost always justifies itself as better than the imagined alternative. Paul Wolfowitz, arguably the most brilliant—and academic—of the Vulcans, wrote the most persuasive and influential position papers.) It’s a surprise that Mann makes no reference to Halberstam; he’s clearly indebted to him, and provides what is in effect an important bookend to *The Best and the Brightest*. Moreover, he discusses at some length how the legacy of failure in Vietnam shaped the Vulcan generation of planners. (In this aspect, the ironies are sometimes too perverse. For instance, one of Donald Rumsfeld’s initial actions as a staffer in the Nixon White House was to challenge his boss and Henry Kissinger to try a little harder at peacemaking in Southeast Asia.)

Yet the two books should be taken together. Combined, they deliver devastating truths: First, that folly is owned by no single political party. And second, a critical mass of academic brainpower does not inoculate against folly. The minds portrayed in these two books, accoutred with PhDs, law degrees, years of experience in think tanks and corporate office suites, are singularly equipped for making articulate and rational policy. They are well-intentioned, and they are persuasive. Like *The Best and the Brightest*, *The Rise of the Vulcans* doesn’t stint on explaining the intellectual credentials of the group under discussion: similarly outstanding academic backgrounds, including Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and Yale. And Mann succeeds in imbuing with dramatic force his narrative of how first-rate minds, working together, were able to incubate, circulate, and eventually implement certain ideas in actual policy. What

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can I say? The story is a thriller. It should find an audience among American citizens everywhere.

As I write this in the middle of October, Iraq has descended into a furious maelstrom of ethnic civil war, with suicide bombings, assassinations, and conventional guerrilla fighting enveloping the country. The sweet success of nabbing a genocidal dictator in his spider hole is now a distant memory as the death toll of American soldiers lurches toward 3,000. For the sake of comparison, it is worth noting that in the single month of September 2006, a total of 2,667 Iraqi civilians died violent deaths in the city of Baghdad. We seem to be destroying the village in order to save it. The number of Iraqi civilians who have

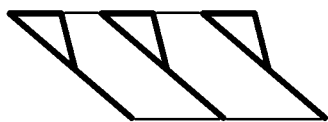
died as a result of the war since its inception is now much debated, with a low figure of 30,000, and estimates as high as 650,000 published in a new study in the British medical journal *Lancet*.

And as I am trying to digest the meaning of how the best and the brightest of two successive generations of leaders could screw things up in spite of their diplomas, their diligence, their many languages, and their indisputable expertise, I begin talking with some colleagues about the ultimate ends of the reading enterprise. Why do we bother? Knowledge doesn't seem to prevent folly. A wise colleague with an Australian accent pokes her head in the door as I am spewing angrily about how all the learning from the best institutions in the world doesn't seem to increase the amount of rational behavior or make a difference. Hell, I've talked

myself into a fury, I'm almost as mad as Barbara Tuchman. And Judith says, "So, Dan, when did you figure out that you don't learn at school the things you *need* to know?"

She's right. Tonight I'll head for home, run a hot bath, and re-read that big fat Victorian novel about Jude Fawley to see what kind of wisdom Thomas Hardy has to offer. One comfort of novels is that they offer clear endings; even in the case of gut-wrenchingly sorrowful conclusions—the kind at which Hardy excelled—we attain the healing illusion of closure. Iraq, at the moment, offers no such thing, and all the wartime reading on my shelf suggests it would be naïve to get one's hopes up. One thing is certain, though, about citizens who bother to read in wartime: we want to know—and eventually, we will know—why. •

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Iran and the Future of Liberalism

Danny Postel

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—Afshin Molavi, author of *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom*

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