

# Driving David Halberstam

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Photo by Amanda Leung

In fall of 1974, I was a senior at Occidental College in Los Angeles. Author David Halberstam was a guest lecturer on campus that spring. Like the young man who was driving Halberstam when he was killed in Menlo Park in April, I was asked to escort him during his visit to Oxy and drive him to his next speaking engagement at UCLA.

As a student newspaper editor in high school and college, the overarching issue I had been writing about was the Vietnam War. *The Best and the Brightest*, Halberstam’s book about the decision making leading us into the Vietnam quagmire, had recently been published. I read the book eagerly, in preparation for hosting him at Oxy. I pondered his concept that “hubris” – pride and overconfidence – caused American leaders to assume that we could determine the outcome of the Vietnam conflict through military force, when so many other factors influenced the situation.

At each break between his speaking engagements at Oxy, Halberstam talked with me. To my delight, he discussed his book with me as though I was another well-informed adult. He not only answered my questions, but he asked me what I thought and challenged my thinking.

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Halberstam’s insights about the forces shaping U.S. foreign and defense policy stayed with me, to eventually be tested against my own experience in policymaking. It is a message worth revisiting in the context of the current situation in Iraq.

When his lectures at Oxy were done, Halberstam invited me to have lunch with him. Being car-less at the time, I had borrowed a professor’s MGB roadster. When Halberstam asked whether it was my car, I was too embarrassed to admit that I had no wheels, so I sort of nodded my head. When we opened the trunk to put in his luggage, to our mutual surprise it was full of golf clubs. With a reporter’s acuity, Halberstam asked me, a long-haired 20-year-old intellectual, about my golf game, to which I mumbled something inconclusive. He cocked his eyebrow, chuckled, and off we went to Alice’s Restaurant in Westwood.

We had more great conversation over lunch, after which he told me to keep in touch and let him know if he could help me,

and I dropped him off at UCLA.

Over the next couple of years, he was as good as his word. He arranged a job interview for me at *The Washington Monthly*, an investigative magazine. When I asked him whether I should go to graduate school in political science or directly into journalism, he said that as a reporter, he always wished he had deeper knowledge about a subject that he could write about with authority, rather than covering many topics in what he regarded as a superficial way. He advised me to choose a field about which I was passionate, and study it in-depth. Then, he said, I could use my writing skills to educate and persuade about that subject.

Halberstam followed his own advice, writing 15 more exhaustive best-sellers on topics from the media to baseball. And I took his advice, too, enrolling in a Ph.D. program at Columbia University. When I arrived in New York in the fall of 1975, he took me to lunch at Charley O’s. Halberstam recommended the steak tartare, and asked me whether I had eaten it before. Just like the car and the golf clubs, I was too embarrassed to let on that I had never heard of steak tartare. I barely touched the mound of raw beef that, to my surprise, appeared on my plate. I think he was testing my moxie, as an aspiring journalist.

Then he wrote me a letter of recommendation to spend the summer of 1976 doing research at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington. But his distrust of the Washington foreign policy establishment was deep, and before I departed for D.C., he wrote me a letter warning me, “Don’t let them inhale you.”

People come into your life at pivotal times, and share their experience in a way that can help orient you to the challenges ahead. David Halberstam was one of those people for me. When he visited college campuses, he could have ridden around in a limousine. Instead, he elected to be driven by students, sharing his experience and prodding us to think more deeply.

I empathized with the student who was driving him in April. I can imagine the fascinating conversation they were having. I can only think that this superb journalist is out there in the great beyond, challenging whoever are the “powers that be” in that realm with his tough, probing questions. And he died doing one of the things most important to him – sharing his wisdom with an aspiring young writer. Ω