

*Books for the World Ahead*

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER

*The Best and the Brightest.* BY DAVID HALBERSTAM. Random House, 1972, 688 pp.

The United States will be the most powerful state on the planet for the next few decades. Since many Americans believe that their country is “the indispensable nation”—to use former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s well-known phrase—they will continue to support an activist foreign policy that seeks to shape the world in accordance with U.S. interests and values. Because American leaders sometimes make tragic mistakes—as they did in Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan—understanding how the United States makes key foreign policy decisions is essential.

No book explains this process better than Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*. First published in 1972 and dealing primarily with Vietnam, Halberstam’s brilliant description of the American foreign policy establishment remains highly relevant today. As Halberstam makes clear, that community is populated by well-educated and ambitious individuals who frequently lack wisdom and almost always lack humility. They tend to think that all problems have ready solutions, which their brilliance will enable them to identify and implement. These people rarely acknowledge limits to U.S. power, which means they sometimes pursue boneheaded policies that lead to disaster.

Unfortunately, the U.S. political system is not especially effective at checking foolish ideas before they influence policy, even though the Founding Fathers designed it for that purpose. As Halber-

stam shows so well, presidents have many ways to manipulate the policy process so that they get what they want. This capacity sometimes produces good outcomes, but when the United States miscalculates, look out. The central message of this seminal book: beware the indispensable nation.

JOHN J. MEARSHEIMER is Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and the author of *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth About Lying in International Politics*.