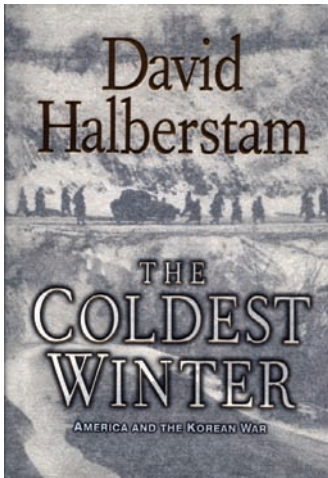


THE COLDEST WINTER

HALBERSTAM David. New York: Hyperion: 2007, hardcover, 712 pages, \$42.00, ISBN: 978-1401300524

2Lt Thomas Fitzgerald, M.A., LL.B., 2IRRC



Pulitzer Prize winning author and journalist, David Halberstam's last work, *The Coldest Winter*, completed five days before his death, is his epic study of that little and often disregarded war, the Korean War. Called a "police action" or a "conflict" involving Chinese "volunteers", the story of the Korean War has many lessons for today's commander and politician alike.

Halberstam's book uncovers no new details nor offers no new interpretation of the war. The story is well known. On June 25, 1950, after being goaded by Mao Zedong and with the connivance of Joseph Stalin, Kim Il-sung launched his well trained, well equipped, veteran divisions against poorly trained, poorly equipped "occupation" American and South Korean regiments. Disaster quickly followed. Seoul fell and the (now) United Nations forces were penned into the "Pusan Perimeter". Facing complete annihilation, it was General of the Army Douglas MacArthur's amphibious landing at Inchon behind enemy

North Korean's lines which led to the rout of the enemy back across the 38th parallel. It was after Inchon that the seeds for future disaster were sewn.

Contrary to all military principles of war, MacArthur divided his command as an early and lethal winter set in. Sending the 8th Army along the western side of the country under the dubious command of his favourite subordinate, LGen Edward Almond, and the Marines of X Corps led by MGen Oliver Smith along the eastern coast, the United Nation chased the defeated enemy into the northern regions of the peninsula. Ignoring credible intelligence of Chinese intentions—"it's not to their advantage to come in, so they won't come in"—and against the instructions of his superiors, MacArthur closed to the Yalu River and the inevitable occurred. Three hundred thousand battle-hardened Chinese veterans, following a series of spoiling, attacks, launched, arguably, the biggest ambush in U.S. military history. The 8th Army was pushed back behind the 38th and was saved only by an ingenious counter attack planned by LGen Matthew Ridgway now commander of the 8th Army. The Marines, in a fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir ("Retreat, hell. We're just attacking in a different direction"), were evacuated by sea.

Villains abound in this recounting: the sycophants who surrounded MacArthur and went so far as to fashion intelligence and facts to support their commander's view of the world rather than reality; the politicians and media magnates of the "China First" lobby whose unwavering support for Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist cause made a rational policy towards Communist China and the Korean conflict impossible; American field commanders who, in the initial stages of the war, recklessly led their troops into battle, contrary to all military logic and common sense and, finally, the Commander-in-Chief, President Harry Truman, who chose to relieve MacArthur only when military necessity outweighed domestic political consequences. The focus of the author's disdain is, however, reserved for MacArthur, whose arrogant incaution leading to military reverses has already been mentioned, but whose failings go further; his refusal to be directed by his civilian superiors; his inability to share the hardships of his soldiers, never spending a single "night in the field in Korea" as noted by the author; his unwillingness to countenance opinions contrary to his own, are all on display in this narrative.

While *The Coldest Winter* provides vivid portraits of the titans of the era—Kim Il-sung, Stalin, Eisenhower, Ridgway and Truman—Halberstam's focus is on the ordinary GI or

the junior officer who fought these brutal and bloody battles usually against overwhelming numbers, in appalling conditions and in difficult terrain, often following the serious strategic or tactical miscalculation of their superiors. Provocative and penetrating descriptions of men knowingly going to their deaths while either attempting to break out of the Chinese encirclement or holding the line so their comrades could be most compelling. It is the courage and the heroics of the ordinary soldier and marine which is the heart of this story. The comments of Gen Ridgway in this regard bear repeating. "All lives on a battlefield are equal and a dead rifleman is as great a loss in the eyes of God as a dead General. The dignity which attaches to the individual is the basis of Western civilization, and that fact should be remembered by every Commander."

In an earlier book, *The Best and the Brightest*,¹ Halberstam chronicles the missteps by the American military which led to the American involvement in Vietnam. How domestic politics became part of national security calculations; how military/political discussions were based on flawed, incomplete and unreliable intelligence. While *The Coldest Winter* precedes *The Best and the Brightest* chronologically, the books are identical in theme.

In his conclusion, Halberstam points to the present situation in Iraq as proof of the old adage, "Those who do not learn by history, are destined to relive it." The Korean War was a war fought in a distant land against an unknown and shadowy enemy where goals were undefined and "which most Americans, save the men who fought there and their immediate families, preferred to know as little as possible". Has anything changed?

Endnote

1. New York: Random House Publishing (1997)
-