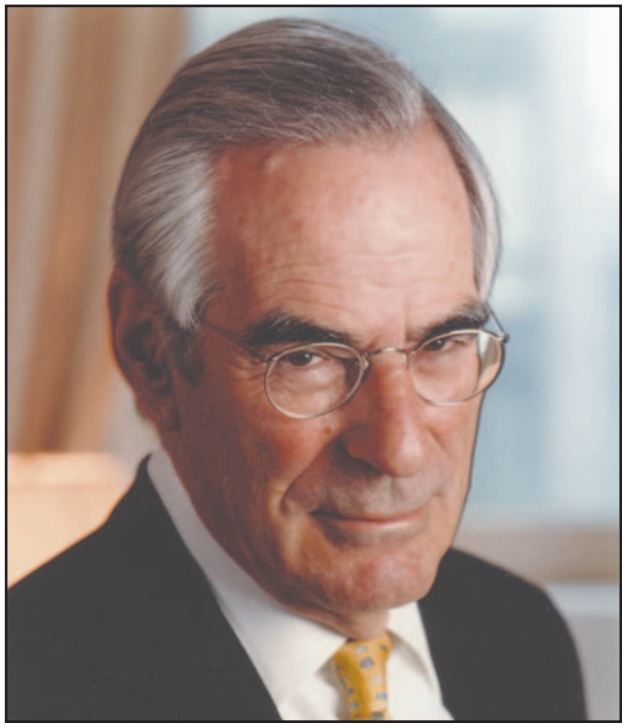
The Fifties … Fifty Years Later

CONNECTION Interviews Historian David Halberstam on a Half Century of Change

David Halberstam graduated from Harvard University in 1955 after serving as managing editor of the *Harvard Crimson.* Upon graduation, he joined the staff of the *Daily Times Leader* newspaper of West Point, Mississippi, and then moved on to the *Nashville Tennessean,* where he covered the Civil Rights Movement. Halberstam joined *The New York Times* in 1960 and won a Pulitzer Prize four years later for his critical reporting on the Vietnam War. He is the author of more than a dozen bestsellers including *The Best and the Brightest, The Powers That Be, The Reckoning* and *The Fifties,* his colorful chronicle of the decade of Eisenhower, Oppenheimer, mass-produced hamburgers, Holiday Inns … and the birth of NEBHE.

NEBHE President Evan S. Dobelle and CONNECTION Executive Editor John O. Harney caught up with Halberstam recently about the past 50 years of educational progress in New England and the historian's childhood days in Winsted, Conn. …



CONNECTION: Looking back 50 years, what was the state of higher education circa 1955?

Halberstam: The early '50s marked a very democratic moment in higher education in the sense that the children of people who had not gone to college started to be able to go. The GI Bill had been a critical step in America becoming a meritocracy. Up until then, people who had higher education—the town leaders, so to speak—continued to have it, and their children tended to be the only ones who had the expectation of going on to college. The pool of people going to college before the war was very, very small. An enormous amount of the country's talent was being lost, because a huge body of people who might have had the natural ability to go to college and thus enrich the society, did not have the resources or the confidence to try to go.

The GI Bill just turned that around, as all kinds of people from ordinary backgrounds suddenly had a shot at rising above the level of their parents. There was this great breakthrough in possibility as the government became, in effect, a sponsor of higher education. Small normal schools became universities. New colleges were built. We had a sense of a great force gathering—an America which was infinitely more democratic in its educational possibilities and, not surprisingly, infinitely more dynamic economically. There was in that period a quantum jump in national confidence and in personal expectations.

But in retrospect, it was narrower than we thought. We perceived ourselves in the '50s as a white society, and the breakthrough was mostly limited to people who were descendents of Italian-Americans, Eastern European Americans, children of Jewish immigrants. They were suddenly getting a chance to go college. But the new college population was predominately white and male along with small numbers of privileged white women, more often than not, daughters of the existing middle class or, more likely, the upper-middle class. In retrospect, that period seems much simpler and much more innocent, at least in its challenge to the nation's educational system.

Now, we're dealing with an infinitely more complex society of immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, many nonwhites, many whose parents don't have a tradition of education.

We're also dealing with migrants from the American Deep South who were, in effect, colonial subjects on our own soil. I believe we were the only great Western power who had its colonial era on native soil. The British and French had to go to far parts of the earth to get cheaper labor in warmer climes where there might

be rubber trees or whatever they needed fed into the economic system back home. But we could do all this on native soil. We wanted tobacco and cotton, and we found these on indigenous soil and brought slaves *to* us. And eventually, in one of the great migrations of the modern era, in the years after World War II, the descendants of those slaves moved north from Mississippi and Alabama and Florida to New England. They also moved from Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

CONNECTION: The knowledge economy was beginning to take shape at that time as well …

Halberstam: Yes, the entry-level job that was so important in the blue-collar economy I was part of has disappeared. So the ability to go from the rural South north to a city like Detroit and get a job at one of the big manufacturing plants is gone, and that makes the process of moving into the middle class much harder now.

The other problem is that college is so much more expensive now. When I went to Harvard from 1951 to 1955, the total charges, including tuition and room and board, were about $1,700. I worked summers as a ditch-digger for Oneglia & Gervasini in Torrington, Conn., where I could make almost $100 a week. I could make half the cost of college over the summer. In those days, you really could work your way through college.

Now, if you could get a summer job as a ditch-digger at all, I imagine you could make about $4,000 over 10 weeks, but that would be a much smaller percentage of the total college bill than I was able to make. College bills have shot up disproportionately in terms of middle-class incomes, and there is a sense that education is pricing itself out of reach for a great many ordinary families.

In the 1950s, someone who made maybe $4,000 or $5,000 a year in a factory was judged to be middle class. He may not have had a lot of choice about what he did for work, but he was able to buy a home and probably send his kids to school for relatively little. It's hard to imagine someone who graduated from high school in New England in the 1950s and really wanted to go to college not being able to do it. The dreams in many homes might not have included college, but it wasn't because college was out of reach financially. So a challenge for us is to keep the gap from widening.

CONNECTION: If, as you have observed, the '50s sowed the seeds of turbulence that emerged in the '60s, then what seeds are we sowing in this first decade of the 21st century for the next generation of young people?

Halberstam: It's hard to tell. Right now, the country is very quiescent. For new college graduates, there's so much pressure to get a job because so much is invested in them. With $200,000 invested in you, you're fighting like hell to get into one law school or another or one business school or another. Then you come out of law school with enormous debt. So the need to validate the enormous investment is very different from the mid-1960s when it wasn't quite so expensive. The need to find a place in the economy—the fear that it may not be there—helps suppress some political dissent.

In the '60s, the country had been prosperous for 20 years following World War II. America was rich in a world that was poor. And two very powerful forces were taking place side by side. One was we were looking at ourselves in terms of race relations. It was 10 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, and we'd had almost 10 years of civil rights protests. The other was the challenge of a neo-colonial war in Vietnam. And the economy was so formidable and energized that there was a feeling you could protest now and worry about getting a job later.

By contrast, these days, everyone worries about getting into the *right* college and then the *right* business school or law school and then finding the *right* job. The pressure on the ablest kids to get a law school or business school degree is very great. And as that happens, your levels of personal freedom shrink. If you're $150,000 in debt, your freedom to maneuver is narrowed.

Traditionally, young kids come out of college, especially those with liberal arts degrees, asking, "Who am I?" or "Who will I be now that I've spent all of dad and mom's money for my college degree?" Those are tougher questions now because society is more demanding.

When I was younger, you could go to college, you could screw up, you could make mistakes, you could get bad marks, but you could find out who you were and eventually right yourself. It wasn't as expensive a deal and you weren't on this very fast pace to succeed. Now, there's a fast pace at the high school to get into the right elite college and a fast pace at the college to get into the right elite graduate school and a fast pace at the graduate school to get into the right law firm or consulting firm. The pressure to get your place in this economy is more stringent.

I think young people today have much more pressure on them, and it can be a huge burden. "So much has been put into me, everybody else my age is already making a couple-hundred-thousand a year at Goldman Sachs, what about me? Am I a failure?" It's a much more success-oriented society than it was 50 years ago. And that's not necessarily a good thing.

We're also turning far too much of our talent into the Wall Street firms or big corporate law firms or consulting companies. These may not necessarily be workplaces where they'll be happy. But they're the places at the end of the treadmill these pressurized young people have been on since they've been trying to get into the right school to get into the right school. Now they have to justify that, though they might be happier being a teacher or something else, taking a chance on their secret desire.

I recently went by my old stomping grounds at the *Harvard Crimson* and asked some senior executives how many were going into journalism, and almost none of them were; they were all going into consulting. The reason was obvious: if you start working at a newspaper, particularly because of the chains, you might start at $30,000. If you go to McKinsey or some consulting firm, you might start at $100,000. The question is would they go to McKinsey if it were only $50,000. Or are those firms offering such high starting salaries because otherwise the graduates wouldn't join them?

Because I worked those summers at Oneglia & Gervasini, I knew how lucky I was to be going to college. Not everyone was trying to go to college then. Now, the more and better educated you are, the better you can do.

And the knowledge that the economy is dictated by education is very palpable. The young people caught in it may not articulate it, but they've been hearing about it in different ways from their parents forever. And they've felt the pressure to do well since they were in elementary school.

CONNECTION: Turning to our corner of the United States, you went to Harvard and grew up partly in Winsted, Connecticut … What was that like?

Halberstam: We grew up all over the country because of World War II. But New England was really the best part of my childhood. I've got some New England roots. My mother grew up in Boston, went to Simmons and had a teaching degree from Boston University. My father had been a medic in World War I and then had gotten into college and then into Tufts medical school. In World War II, he went back in the service as a surgeon. He was 45 at the time, but he felt that he owed his country, and we were Jewish, and he felt he knew what that war was about. We lived for a time in my uncle's house in Winsted, then followed my father to Texas when he was stationed there, then back to Winsted, then back to Texas, then briefly to Rochester, Minn., and back to Winsted. By eighth grade, I had been in six schools but the happiest part of this peripatetic childhood was in Winsted.

Winsted was a small milltown of about 8,000 in northwestern Connecticut, and it had a very good school system. I'm one of the few people who can say he's known Ralph Nader since fourth grade. Another guy in our class, John Bushnell, went on to be deputy assistant secretary of state for Latin America. Winsted had that traditional New England respect for education. A lot of our teachers were schoolmarms from small towns in Maine where the Industrial Revolution had not reached, so being paid $900 a year in a town like Winsted where there was a manufacturing base was a good deal. They'd been to normal schools and they had grown up in poverty or in very austere circumstances where they learned about authority firsthand in their own homes. And they taught you well—very well in fact. It was a calling for them.

Winsted was a melting pot. There was the Gilbert Clock factory and a factory that made rifle stocks—and we would pick up the unused stocks on the way home from school for kindling. It was blue-collar and predominately white, but multi-ethnic as we defined it in those days, with people of all different nationalities. There was no prejudice or at least very little that I was aware of. Whatever background you came from, that was fine. Regrettably, that was not true when we moved to Westchester County in 1947. There were a lot ethnic slurs on the playground, and I was shocked to have teachers who were anti-Semitic. Anti-Semitism coming from a teacher was a punch in the nose. I'd been all over the country and I'd never had a teacher act that way. It was quite painful for me.

And when I got to the eighth grade in this affluent Westchester system, they were not as advanced as we had been in Winsted. The basic teaching in English and math in Winsted was very good, and I think it was just a consensus on the part of town leaders that they would have a great school system.

Recently, I got the class book from the 50th reunion of the high school in Winsted, and I was very impressed by how well so many of my classmates had done, including many who had not gone on to college. My sense was that they had come away from those years with a core educational strength that allowed them to hold down very good jobs. I have a very positive feeling about that school system and how things were done. Each grade was broken down into three classes: a smart or college track class, a middle track class and then a vocational track class. The smart class was the "C" class, the slow one the "A" class.

Also in the smart class, there were about 25 girls and seven boys. Years later, I did a graduation speech at nearby Torrington High School and that situation was about the same. The valedictorian was a boy, and about the next 18 kids were girls.

The other thing we had in Winsted was "penny milk," a nickel a week for milk, and if your family was so poor that you didn't have it, it was very quietly arranged that the school system would take care of it. There were wonderful things built into the culture. There's a great sense in New England of the value of education.

CONNECTION: Where do you see a region like New England with very slow population growth going socially and economically in the next 10 or 20 years?

Halberstam: The pull of the economy is I guess to the Sun Belt. We're in a youth culture, and the great migration is to the Sunbelt. Cities that were not big cities are

now major places to live in part because of the change in the economy and in part because of the coming of air conditioning. Places that are considered very desirable today were not desirable then because the air conditioning was not part of the operable daily life. Huge parts of the country including cities like Houston and Phoenix had no growth because of their climate.

As the industrial economy has declined and service has taken its place, places in the Southwest have become greater magnets for young people. The economies of Nashville, Tenn., and Charlotte, N.C., are probably more energized than comparable cities in New England and therefore are draws for young people, so I suppose there has been an outmigration of certain kinds of talent from New England, though not as bad as from the Rust Bowl.

CONNECTION: In several of your books, you have eloquently connected developments in baseball to changes in America society. Are you a Red Sox fan?

Halberstam: Winsted was exactly in the DMZ between Yankee world and Red Sox Nation. When the Red Sox were playing the Yankees, they would load up one bus of Red Sox fans and one of Yankees fans. You could get the Yankees station on the radio or the Sox station—and root accordingly.

I was born in the Bronx so I grew up as a Yankee fan. Then in 1988, I did *Summer of '49*. I got very friendly with Dom DiMaggio and Bobby Doerr and Johnny Pesky, and I had a great day with Ted Williams. In general, I had a better time with the Red Sox players, the ones I've mentioned, and Boo Ferriss and Mel Parnell. I kept up my friendships with some of them. Then Dom DiMaggio told me the story of the trip he and Johnny Pesky made to see the dying Ted Williams. And I thought, "What a wonderful story!" That will never happen again, four guys staying friends that long. So I am pulled to them. Besides, I've just finished a book on Bill Belichick, so I've been pulled once more into the New England sporting world.

CONNECTION: So you are a New Englander at heart?

Halberstam: I live in New York and I live in Nantucket as well. When I first visited Nantucket 37 years ago, there were many things about it that reminded me of Winsted. New York still thrills me, but so does Boston. Recently, I went to Fenway Park—59 years after I visited the ballpark for the first time—and I was deeply moved again. So I guess I qualify for dual citizenship, a citizen of New York and a citizen of New England.