**Our Stories**

**50 YEARS LATER**

*Published by the Yale College Class of 1969*

*on the occasion of its 50th Reunion*

**Yale and the Shaping of American Foreign Policy, Then and Now**

By Jim Sleeper

Even if most of us weren’t thinking of getting into foreign-policy as we entered Yale in September, 1965, foreign policy would get *into us*, and the consequences would rattle Yalies not only on campus but also in State, Defense, the CIA, and the White House. Now that the word “foreign” eclipses more than it catches about the United States’ increasingly fluid, precarious position in a global economy amid unprecedented migrations, cultural upheavals, and nationalist reactions here and abroad, our youthful assumptions and experiences have been superseded at Yale, as well as in Washington.

Three braided but conflicting strains in Yale’s influence on “foreign policy” inflected our understandings of the world in the 1960s: They were a secretive, “spook” strain; a public “statesmanship” strain; and a dissenting, remonstrative strain that stems from Yale’s very origins. As we approached graduation and the Vietnam War raged, with no end in sight, the dissenting strain seemed to have risen to challenge the intelligence agencies and the State Department, as well as Yale itself, which had spawned and sustained them.

Even if you haven’t read David Halberstam’s *The Best and Brightest,* Evan Thomas’ *The Very Best Men,* Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas’ *The Wise Men,* Geoffrey Kabaservice’s *The Guardians,* or Timothy Weiner’s *Legacy of Ashes,* you know that a lot went wrong in the ventures of Yale’s spooks and statesmen after World War II – in Eastern Europe, Guatemala, Iran, the Bay of Pigs, and Vietnam – a lot more than many of us knew in 1969, though, and than most of the public knows even now.

But isn’t there something worth rescuing from the “legacy of ashes”? Two of Yale’s recent projects hope that there is: The Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy, begun shortly before 9/11, and Yale College’s more recent joint venture with the National University of Singapore to establish the liberal arts Yale-NUS College are trying, in different ways, to reconcile Yale’s spook and statesmanship strains with its dissenting strain; to marry Yale’s training for republican stewardship, power-wielding, and capitalist wealth-making with the dissenting strain’s mission to interrogate and sometimes oppose established aims and arrangements, not just facilitate them. The dissenting strain runs back to Socrates, who was forced to drink fatal hemlock for challenging the powers that were, and to the Old Testament prophets who loomed large in the imaginations of the men who put the Hebrew on the seal of Yale and called it a “school of prophets.”

The spook or Intelligence strain (or, if you like caricature, the “Good Shepherd”/Skull & Bones strain) began during World War II, when James J. Angleton (’41) conceived the CIA in New Haven as the Office of Strategic Services. For a quick if somewhat grand refresher, look up “Yale—A Great Nursery of Spooks,” the 1987 *New York Times* review of Robin Winks’ *Cloak and Gown.* [https://www.nytimes.com/1987/ 08/16/books/yale-a-great- nursery-of-spooks.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/16/books/yale-a-great-nursery-of-spooks.html) Scores of Yale men died abroad on OSS and CIA missions. An exact replica of the statue of Nathan Hale that we all encountered as freshmen on Old Campus stands before CIA headquarters in Langley, VA. Hale (Class of 1773) qualifies as the first “spy” of the nascent American republic, but it was Yale’s post-World War II spooks who resurrected him in bronze when we were still children.

The Grand Strategy program also addresses the second, more public strain, that of statesmanship, embodied by the Cold War Secretary of State Dean Acheson (Class of 1915), Secretary of Defense Robert Abercrombie Lovett (1918), and U.S. ambassadors to the USSR William C. Bullitt (1912) and Averell Harriman (1913). Closer to our own time, John Kerry (‘66) was Secretary of State from 2013 to 2017, and Strobe Talbott (‘68) was a Deputy Secretary of State from 1994 -2001. Countless other Yale College graduates have served in such posts and in the White House, where, during our own undergraduate years, McGeorge Bundy (‘1940) and Walt Rostow (’40) were point men for the Vietnam War. George H. W. Bush (‘48) was both statesman and spook, serving as ambassador to the UN and China before leading the CIA and, later, the country. But when we were in college he was a Texas congressman, and some of us knew more about his father, Prescott Bush (1917) who’d retired in 1963 as a U.S. Senator from Connecticut, and of course, about George W. (‘68)

In 2003, the Iraq war seemed a Yale undertaking from top to bottom, from Bush and Dick Cheney (Yale drop-out, ‘61) and Bush’s classmate, R. James Woolsey, who directed the CIA, followed by John Negroponte (‘60) as Director of National Intelligence in 2005, to countless others: Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz had been a Yale political science professor for I. Scooter Libby (‘72), who’d become Cheney’s chief of staff. Other Yale alums in the Iraq mission were David Frum (‘82), Bush’s “axis of evil” speechwriter; L. Paul Bremer III (‘63), the Iraq Provisional Coalition Administrator; and Robert Kagan (‘80), the Reagan State Department veteran, neoconservative writer, and fervent booster of the Iraq War. (Kagan’s father, the Yale classicist Donald Kagan, was also a fervent booster.) Some of my Yale students from 1999 to 2003 served in the war or were public advocates for it. Donald Trump’s National Security Advisor John Bolton (‘70, Yale Law ‘74), was another fervent advocate.

Think, too, of the almost “all-Yale” 2004 presidential race among our own generation’s graduates, Bush and Kerry -- after Kerry had defeated Joe Lieberman (‘64) and Howard Dean (’71) in the Democratic primaries.

For the third, dissenting strain, think of Howard Dean and of Dwight Macdonald (‘28), the World War II and Cold War literary and political critic (and descendant of two of the Yale “school of prophets’” Puritan presidents, grandfather and grandson, both named Timothy Dwight). No one needs to ask us to think of William Sloane Coffin, Jr. (‘49, Div. ‘66), who was in the OSS in Eastern Europe as World War II ended, two decades before we encountered him as a dissenter. There were also Staughton Lynd, the historian whose trip to Hanoi we remember, and the anti-Vietnam War activist and radical pacifist Dave Dellinger (’36).

The dissenting strain was ascendant during our college years, and by 1975 it seemed to have routed spooks and statesmen everywhere as Saigon fell and a “Vietnam Syndrome” rose, resisting such ventures. Two decades later, though, the other strains rebounded with the fall of the Berlin Wall and “Desert Storm” under George H.W. Bush. As late as 2004, the military triumph in Baghdad seemed to boost the Washington consensus that free trade and democracy reinforce one another.

For the next ten years, in fact, Yale’s old conduits to the power centers of the Washington consensus were refurbished and strengthened by the Grand Strategy seminar, directed by John Gaddis, Yale’s Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History, and by the historian Paul Kennedy and “Diplomat in Residence” Charles Hill, a former executive assistant to Secretary of State George Shultz. "We're training the next generation of world leaders," Gaddis told the Yale Alumni Magazine in 2003, “and Washington has taken notice.”

Funded at first by the conservative Olin and Smith-Richardson Foundations, and after 2006 by Nicholas F. Brady (’52), Treasury Secretary under presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and securities analyst Charles B. Johnson (’54), the seminar became the flagship of the fleet of courses in the Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy. It attracted wide media attention and emulation, with variations, at Columbia, Duke, Temple and the state universities of Wisconsin and Texas.

Striving to bring “the best of what has been thought and written about grand strategy over the past 2,500 years” to bear on preparing students for leadership in all sectors of society, the seminar admits graduate and undergraduate students from among more than two-hundred applicants each year. It follows readings in classic texts on grand strategy with summer internships abroad and high-pressure exercises in policy design and crisis simulation. Eminences of statecraft, scholarship, and journalism, including Kissinger, deliver guest lectures and dine with the students at Mory’s.

One of the program’s abiding goals has been to regenerate a team spirit worthy of Edmund Burke’s “little platoons” of public stewards and Platonic republican guardians of foreign policymaking. I got a taste of how that works as I and a few hundred other alumni at our 2004 reunion listened to Gaddis tell us, “We hauled the entire [Yale] Grand Strategy class down to New York to meet Henry Kissinger and hear about his sense of the great deficit that exists in grand-strategic thinking.” Gaddis added that “One of the students was outraged by Christopher Hitchens’s book accusing Henry of war crimes, so I said, ‘Why not do a senior essay on Kissinger’s ethics?’ I saw a draft of it and called Henry, and he said ‘Bring him in,’ and he hired him on the spot—to fact-check Christopher Hitchens!”

Many old Blues in the audience swooned. This was how things had been done at Yale in their time, and, by God, Grand Strategy was bringing back the old *élan*! But when we’d been seniors sweating the draft, Kissinger had been Richard Nixon’s new national security advisor, helping to prolong the war that Nixon had vowed to end.

Disillusionment with the old ways would turn with a vengeance decades later with the intelligence failures of 9/11 and the Iraq War and the financial and economic near-meltdown of 2008, all on the presidential watch of a guy whom many of us knew from DKE, political science, intramural rugby, or the Davenport dining hall.

Grand Strategy’s instructors sought to counter that disillusionment by sprinkling some of the “Good Shepherd” mystique into the program’s trappings and rites of passage to spooksmanship and statesmanship. They made no secret of their disdain for the dissenting strain’s influence on the social sciences, which they charged had become visionless and nit-picking, and the humanities, which they charged had become “politically correct.”

The accused sometimes answered that a liberal education *should* challenge established premises and practices, not merely serve them. The Grand Strategy instructors weren’t wrong to question what some of that “questioning” was becoming, but global economic, climatic, demographic, and political sea changes were exposing deficits in “grand-strategic” premises about American hegemony, the viability of nation-states, and the benefits of the Washington Consensus. Such premises may have inclined John Gaddis in 2005 to help write George W. Bush’s second Inaugural address, for which he was rewarded with a National Medal of the Humanities at a White House ceremony that year.

As global and domestic upheavals have continued to rattle assumptions about American leadership, Gaddis has retired from directing Grand Strategy, whose directorship has passed to the American labor historian Beverly Gage (‘94). She is renewing the program’s broader claim to enhance decision-making in all sectors, not just in Washington. That shift raises new questions about what the program’s goals should be. But it also suggests that grand-strategic pedagogy has been hitched a little too tightly to foreign policy premises that, even as we were graduating, were lagging behind the swift undercurrents that have now transformed Yale College as well as America. Today, nearly 15 percent of Yale undergraduates are international students, at the behest not of the politically correct but of the powerful, including Richard Levin, who, as Yale’s president, emphasized its identity as an international university.

In 2011, reinforcing a shift from Yale’s civic-republican, American nationalism to a global-capitalist cosmopolitanism, Levin and the Yale Corporation announced a second big “foreign-policy” project: a joint venture with Singapore to establish the liberal-arts Yale-National University of Singapore College, which graduated its first class in 2017. But long before Yale’s trustees thought of co-founding Yale-NUS, several had come to Singapore as investors, not educators. As a world-capitalist *entrepot* andtightly run, relatively safe port in the storms of global capitalist exploit, the tiny (population, 6 million) island city-state welcomed them to its sovereign wealth funds — the Government Investment Corporation, chaired by the prime minister, and Temasek Holdings, which designated Yale trustee, Charles Goodyear IV (‘80) as its CEO for two years, beginning in 2009. Another Yale Corporation member, Fareed Zakaria (‘86) praised Singapore’s authoritarian state capitalism in *The Future of Freedom* as a model for societies that must liberalize economically before they can liberalize politically. At Davos he interviewed Singapore’s autocratic founder Lee Kuan Yew and his son, Lee Hsien Loong, the current prime minister.

It was almost inevitable that the trustees would establish Yale-NUS College to enhance their collaboration with Singapore in market and political terms. But they knew, too, that a liberal arts college is more than a career training and networking center or cultural galleria for future global investors and managers. Its deeper purpose, and liberal education’s, is to strengthen young citizens’ capacities for free inquiry and expression by equipping them to question and sometimes challenge their societies’ arrangements and premises. Arguably, that strengthens those societies’ and humanity’s prospects in the long run.

But how strongly committed to that purpose were Singapore’s political leaders and Yale’s investors? You could have heard a pin drop among the 150 professors -- three times more than usual -- at a closed-door, March 1, 2012, meeting of the Yale College Faculty in New Haven as one of them – Seyla Benhabib, Yale’s Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and Philosophy (and my wife) – told President Levin that his administration shouldn't have collaborated with an authoritarian, corporate city-state to establish a new college bearing Yale’ name without most of the Yale faculty knowing about it. (The full terms of the contract remain secret.)

"We're grateful for what you and the Yale Corporation do," Benhabib said. "But in political philosophy there's a living, unwritten constitution: Yale is really what we do --our research, teaching, and conferences. Without that, there is no Yale to take abroad or anywhere else. The faculty are the *collegium*" - a company of scholars that, to do its work well, has to stand somewhat apart from both markets and states.

A month later, in Levin’s presence, the faculty voted, 160 to 69, to rebuke the administration for doing too little to “protect and further principles of non-discrimination for all, including sexual minorities and migrant workers; to uphold civil liberty and political freedom on campus and in the broader society. These ideals lie at the heart of liberal arts education as well as of our civic sense as citizens, and they ought not to be compromised in any dealings or negotiations with the Singaporean authorities.”

The faculty was worried less about Singapore than about the “corporatization” of universities and civil societies in both countries. It sensed danger not in an open clash of values between Yale and Singapore but in an all-too-smooth convergence between American business-corporate encroachments on universities here and the authoritarian state capitalism that governs Singapore to the satisfaction of investors but not of its million-plus migrant workers and many of its tightly monitored citizens.

The danger in such a convergence returns us to the broader challenges facing Grand Strategy. “Superpowers Don’t Get to Retire,” warned Robert Kagan in a powerful 2013 essay in The New Republic, urging Americans to acknowledge that only willpower and force can sustain the liberal order that Americans take for granted. Quoting Michael Ignatieff, Kagan acknowledged that liberal civilization itself “runs deeply against the human grain and is achieved and sustained only by the most unremitting struggle against human nature.” Perhaps, he added, “this fragile democratic garden requires the protection of a liberal world order, with constant feeding, watering, weeding, and the fencing off of an ever-encroaching jungle.”

But those encroachments come not only from abroad but also from within our own garden, from rich American hands as often as from poor ones, from white hands far more often than from black ones. Even with the best of intentions, some of Yale’s own postwar strategists have been carriers, casualties, and apologists for the encroachments that Kagan rightly resists. They’ve been more than a little too eager to supply missing drapery for emperors without clothes.

No one anticipated such dangers more clearly than Yale’s own founders. They crossed an ocean into “a howling wilderness” to escape a corrupt regime and build their college and society on moral and civic foundations stronger than armies and wealth. Soon enough, though, they had to seek material support from Elihu Yale, a governor of one of the world’s first multinational corporations, the East India Company (which would acquire the island of “Singapura” for the British Crown in 1812). Soon enough, too, Yale would send Christian missionaries to Asia, among them the parents of Henry Luce and John Hersey, both of whom were born in China.

But most Yale “missionaries” nurtured American civil society itself: Yale graduates were the founders or first presidents of nearly 100 new colleges in the 19th century and of even more YMCA’s and similar associations, as well as of the “muscular Christian,” character-building football that captured young America’s imagination and heart a century ago. Our Class of 1969’s own “class notes” and essays suggest that that building continues. Although the Truth-seeking we encountered in college was less avowedly religious than “liberal” in the classical sense that a liberal education requires, it nurtured in many of us enough independence of spirit and habits of the heart to stand apart at times from established premises and practices. Grand-strategic ventures abroad ultimately depend on such intellectual independence and compassion at home, because the civic-republican strengths that good foreign policymaking requires can always be drained more decisively from within than from without.