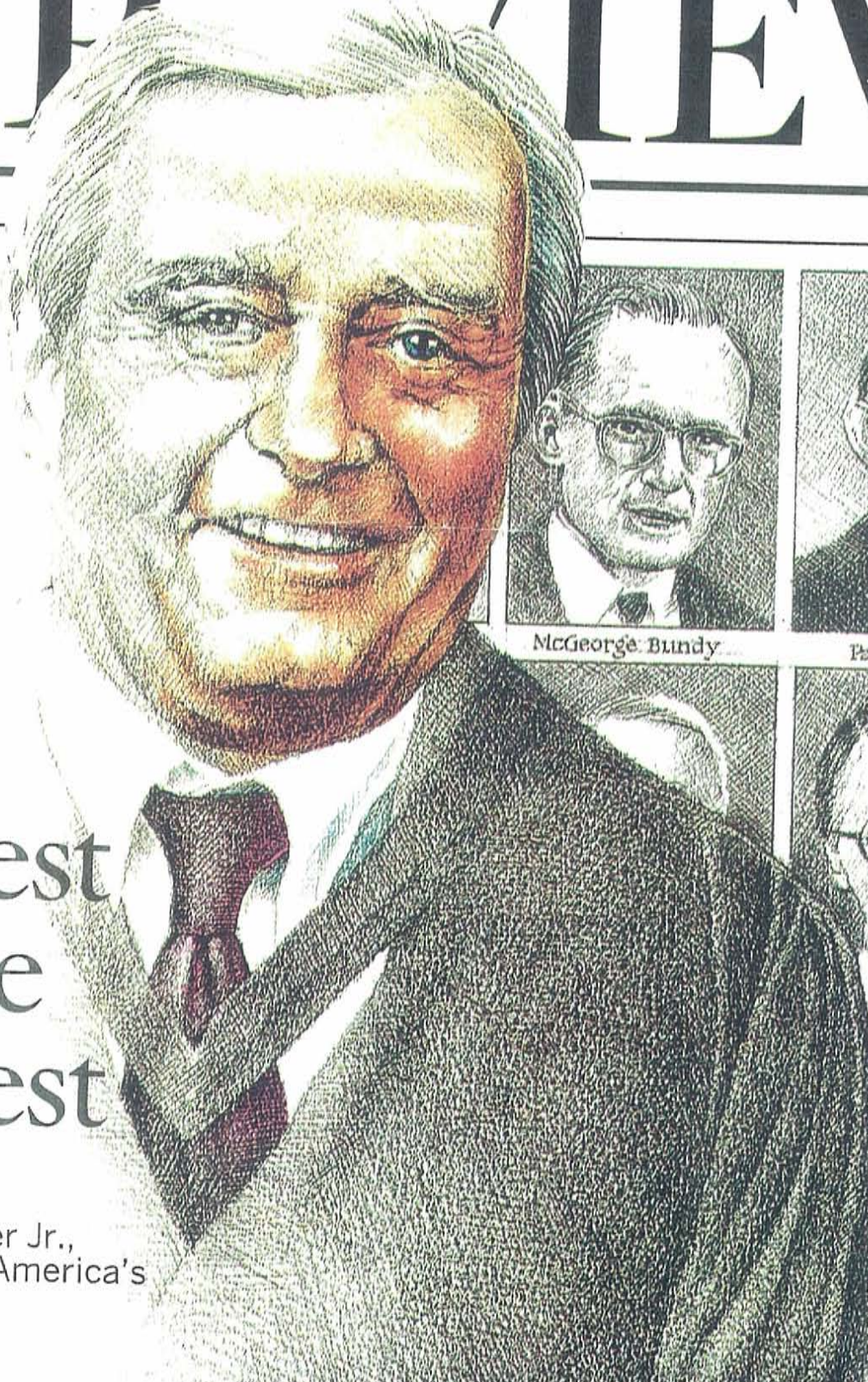
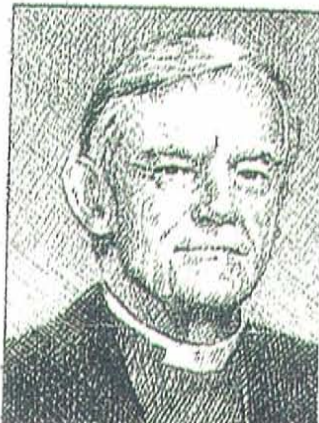


BOOK PREVIEW

Monday, April 4, 2004



McGeorge Bundy



Paul Moore Jr.



Elliot Richardson



The best and the rightest

1 Sleeper

William Brewster Jr.,
University and America's
governing elite

From ivory tower to the halls of power

By JIM SLEEPER

The Guardians

Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of the Liberal Establishment

Geoffrey Kabaservice

Henry Holt: 576 pp., \$30

KINGMAN BREWSTER JR., the grand, wily, sometimes wacky eminence who ran Yale from 1964 to 1977, wanted it to produce each year 1,000 "leaders in their generation . . . who will have a constructive impact on our society thirty years later." Although his notions of leadership ran deeper than the electoral, he'd have been pleased with his latest harvest of presidential timber: Joe Lieberman ('64, Yale Law '67), John Kerry ('66) and Howard Dean ('71). Not to mention Bill and Hillary Clinton (both Yale Law '73).

Two people probably not to have mentioned to the Brewster portrayed in Geoffrey Kabaservice's "The Guardians," though, would have been George W. Bush ('68) and Dick Cheney (Yale dropout '61), who have all but buried the "liberal establishment" that Brewster ('41) and his circle piloted through the turbulent 1960s after inheriting it partly from an older Yale crew (W. Averell Harriman, Dean Acheson, Robert Abercrombie Lovett and others) who framed the Atlantic Alliance and Cold War containment. Brewster's problem with today's team wouldn't have been partisan; he and many in his circle were Republicans, albeit of a genus now extinct. Nor would it have been narrowly ideological: Even the most liberal of Brewster's cohorts were often denounced by the new left as moderates co-opting social change. What Brewster was seeking was a leadership whose authority rested in a small "r" republican civic virtue that is seldom evident now and even less understood.

Brewster's shipmates included fellow Yale undergrads McGeorge Bundy, the Vietnam War-era national security advisor and later Ford Foundation president; Cyrus Vance, the roving ambassador, domestic civic mediator extraordinaire and Jimmy Carter's secretary of State; New York Mayor John Lindsay; and New York's Episcopal Bishop Paul Moore Jr. Kabaservice weaves their portraits and others' into a tapestry depicting the group's star-crossed voyage through critical national decision-making, political exile and death; his subtitle might better read, "The Fall of the Liberal Establishment," but this is really the story of a quest for great American leadership that hasn't been told so fairly and richly before.

The "circle" included Harvard interlopers, such as Nixon Cabinet dissident Elliot Richardson; Brewster and Bundy themselves had passed some time in that bleak citadel of global managerialism on the Charles. But as Lewis Lapham (Yale '56) put it later, Harvard's meritocrats may talk about civic leadership but they can't get the music right (see, for example, Al Gore). That was Yale's calling, and Brewster would have winced at the martial airs of Bush and Cheney.

Recent books and movies have over-dramatized Yale-bred elites' supposed deft comminglings of public mission and private agenda. But many of Yale's public men were indeed knit so tightly together that they could seem

conspiratorial: As they were running the world (or ruining it, depending on whom one asked), Bundy, Vance, Lindsay and Moore met regularly with Brewster on the Yale Corporation. While Lindsay and Bundy (at Ford) were collaborating in a 1967 community-control experiment in Brooklyn schools, they headed off a bid by William F. Buckley Jr. for a Yale Corporation seat by putting Vance on the ballot. Buckley also ran for mayor against Lindsay, whose 1969 reelection coincided with Moore's elevation as Episcopal bishop of New York. Is that tight enough for you?

Small wonder that in the populist understanding of Yale's more recent history — reinforced gently by Calvin Trillin's "Remembering Denny" and Nicholas Lemann's "The Big Test" — a gothically imposing, slightly dunder-headed, white-shoe male club is wrenched open at last to a vibrant pluralism of color, culture and class. This story is true enough to make us heedless of something lost in the translation: Plato's Guardians — cited in Kabaservice's epigraph — for whom the Republic is "so closely bound up with oneself that its interests and fortunes, for good or ill, are held to be identical with one's own." Where is such leadership nourished now? "Mother of Men, grown strong in giving," runs a song to old Yale, "Rich in the toil of thousands living, proud of the deeds of thousands dead!" A bit musty, but what now matches the depth of such constraints on self-interest?

Brewster once teased a cousin who'd sent him an encomium to Elder William Brewster, his direct lineal antecedent and minister on the Mayflower, that he was "grateful that you and I had the wisdom to select such a magnificent ancestor." His bemusedly secure yet egalitarian sense of the absurdities of caste belongs in leaders of a republic who know that self-restraint by the powerful is critical to others' freedom. Even as a Yale senior, Brewster had refused induction into his mentors' and friends' secret society, Skull & Bones. Vance and Richardson too would fall on their swords, resigning high office rather than compromise republican principles.

Kabaservice's account leaves one wondering why men whose forebears had governed so much of America for so long passed the torch of leadership without securing the rites of passage, disciplines and standards that nourish not only "merit" but dedication, not self-promotion but self-denial and, in a crisis, self-immolation: "They were

the 'guardian critics,' as the columnist Tom Wicker called them, who tried to break down the power of the smaller establishments by speaking from the heart of the American tradition in the name of the national interest."

Brewster was the most expressive and innovative of the group, and Kabaservice credits partly his youthful rites of passage as a sailing champion off his ancestral Martha's Vineyard. Tacking back and forth against the elements and other sailors with a nervy gambler's instinct, knowing when to trust winds and tides and when to defy them, he became deft and daring and summoned a sense of the humorous, the awesome and the absurd against the powerful swells — both the swift, dark waves and the rich young men who rode them. Nautical metaphors salted his public discourse: His sense of "ideological frothiness" in Depression-era America and in the new Nazi Germany suggests a detached yet attentive respect for the rush and suction of powerful tides moving across dangerous rocks.

Inland, at the elite schools feeding Yale and Harvard under New England's charcoal skies, the very brooks seemed to bubble with moral instruction, and eight-man river rowing taught that self-denial for the common good requires first a self that has been made strong enough to deny. In Kabaservice's account, these privileged redoubts encouraged self-scrutiny, plain living and high thinking, an understated felicity of expression, a quiet readiness to take responsibility without reward and an ability to bear pain with grace (if only because spiritual grace was thereby assured). A characteristic self-deprecating humor deflected others' envy and one's guilt about privilege. The term "character" is ridiculed in some quarters as shorthand for elite breeding, but as Kabaservice suggests — and Tobias Wolff evokes beautifully in his novel "Old School" — these lean, bonded boys honed not only the bookish but also the kinetic, emotional and moral intelligence that progressive educators tout now against mere "merit."

Did a regimen so intense require a father-to-son intimacy and hence a WASP patrilineal genealogy to transmit? Brewster's life taught him otherwise: His racist, reactionary father left him "a stepmother in every port," and Brewster believed his father's generation to be complicit in the follies of Spanish-American War imperialism and of the "war to end all wars." At 17, at the Belmont Hill

School, Brewster won a debate against Groton's McGeorge Bundy, Bundy's brother Bill and FDR Jr., arguing that "capitalism is more conducive to war than socialism," but he soon concluded that the center, with good leadership, can be tempered by the extremes raging at its margins. As Yale undergrads in the late 1930s, Brewster and Bundy split over new intervention in Europe, Brewster believing that America's republican experiment had miscarried so badly abroad that internal reform must precede foreign ventures. Many of his classmates shared his "America First" instincts, not out of pro-Nazism but out of a conviction that American elites had failed the republic and should concentrate



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PRESIDENT: Kingman Brewster Jr.'s Yale was still the ancient temple of a national WASP elite but also a modern template for a new leadership training. [See Brewster, Page 4]

on democratizing but also deepening the standards of its leadership.

After Pearl Harbor, Brewster and his friends enlisted immediately. Moore and Richardson bore wounds heroically; Brewster flew for the Army and became a top aide in the postwar Marshall Plan. But his mission remained American internal reform — to revive national leadership with new blood as well as old truths. The backdrop of Kabaservice's tapestry shows Yale not as the rich boys' finishing school it had been for 50 years after the Gilded Age but as the crucible of civic leadership it had been earlier — and that it was for Brewster and would be for his new "leaders."

Yet the Brewster circle's privilege bred not just guilt's harsh disciplines but also a naiveté about the rest of society — a moralism and ignorance that converged in arrogance toward others less magnanimous because less fortunate. There was often a hasty, even faddish presumption in crusades like Brewster's too-sweeping reforms of Yale's admissions policy and his comrades' ventures into "urban renewal" and inner-city "community control" — and in Bundy's case into Vietnam. Kabaservice notes Thucydides' warning that it can be "a misfortune to have very brilliant men in charge of affairs; they expect too much of ordinary men." With Brewster's "Guardians" it wasn't just brilliance but a presumption that everyone's resources were boundless and their intentions good.

At Yale that presumption could work. In the book's climax, Brewster's college, still the ancient temple of a national WASP elite but by then also a modern template for a new leadership training, becomes for two years the national stage on which that leadership is tested. A tumultuous mass debate in the hockey rink in 1969 (with Bundy, Lindsay, Moore and Vance as well as Brewster eminent in attendance) over the legitimacy of the Army's on-campus Reserve Officer Training Corps yields a scrupulously counted 1,286-to-1,286 tie, prompting the community to abandon acrimony and roar with applause for its civic virtue. A Washington Post reporter described "a strong sense that democracy had prevailed, that the administration was not scared of its students." Nor did the students fear one another. The process itself had won.

For nourishing that process, Brewster was reviled as much by the radical provocateur Jerry Rubin (who kept miscalling him "Kingston Brewer" while trying to incite riots at Yale during the May 1970 Black Panther trial) as by Bill Buckley. And for the same reason, really: Brewster's liberal establishment believed that truth emerges neither in radical pronouncements of the general will nor in religious doctrine but provisionally, in the trust-building processes of deliberative democracy. "[A]nyone who is himself willing to listen deserves to be listened to," Brewster wrote in a 1967-68 annual report: "If he is unwilling to open his mind to persuasion, then he forfeits his claim on the audience of others."

He had managed to create a small civil society, more diverse than before, with enough disciplined comity to be progressive and peaceful. In students like the dreadlocks-wearing future Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke, he encountered the leaders he called for, who had mastered so early the arts and graces of public trust

and high-souled dissent that they made democracy compelling enough to carry the day. They would learn that liberalism depends on virtues and beliefs that the liberal state itself cannot nourish or defend, much less impose. But the counterintuitive lesson of this book is that therefore liberal leaders must somehow be nourished all the more intensively. Yale did that. Just days after it settled the Panther-trial crisis, the Kent State killings recalled earlier, violent police busts at Columbia and Harvard.

"To a remarkable extent this place has detected and rejected the very few who have worn the colors of high purpose falsely," Brewster told my entering class on Sept. 13, 1965. "This is done not by administrative edict . . . but by a pervasive ethic of student and faculty loyalty and responsibility . . . which lies deep in our origins and traditions." No one knew better than he how fragile those traditions were and what daring artistry it would take to keep trust alive. When I shook his hand at the day's freshman reception, I was awed to learn that he had been born in my western Massachusetts hometown. Congratulating myself that evening on my wisdom in having selected such a magnificent elder, I was teased by a Boston Brahmin classmate, the nephew of a man profiled in this book,

that "anyone who comes from west of East Dedham is a barbarian."

Already, though, the old guard was changing. Barely a week after that freshman assembly, I took a pocket-money job at the Yale Student Laundry and, for a semester, collected the dry cleaning of, among others, George W. Bush, an Andover guy in the next entryway whose grandfather had been a U.S. senator from Connecticut but whose father had moved to where fewer brooks bubble with moral instruction. In the fall of 1966, as Kabaservice reports, when John Kerry

Brewster was seeking a leadership whose authority rested in a small 'r' republican civic virtue seldom evident now.

had just graduated and was joining the Navy out of an "old school" duty like that of Brewster's Guardians, 60% of Yale upperclassmen believed the United States should maintain or increase its commitment in Vietnam. But a year after that, moderate Republican students of Brewster's and Richardson's ilk, such as the future deputy secretary of State Strobe Talbott, were breaking with Cold War interventionism. By the time they graduated in 1968, even more conservative classmates like George W. Bush were finessing the "old school" duty call.

Yale's own Guardians have changed now, and three months before Sept. 11 Bush was awarded an honorary doctorate at the behest of the university's current president. Kabaservice reminds us that one of Brewster's first such awards, in 1964, had gone to Martin Luther King Jr., then newly out of jail. The challenge remains what King always said it was — not just to open the doors of leadership but to deepen its republican commitments. ■