THE WASHINGTON POST
16 January 1981

Whizzes, Older & Wiser

McNamara's 'Brash Young Men,' Reunited

By Megan Rosenfeld

At 32, Ivan Selin, possessor of two PhDs, was an assistant secretary of defense. He was, in effect, "vice president for planning and analysis of the biggest corporation in the world."

He was a "whiz kid," a New York public school graduate who went to Yale at 15 on scholarship, a civilian brought in under Robert S. McNamara's program for new management at the Pentagon. He was 28 when he came to Washington, like the other "whiz kids" young, ambitious, eager to introduce the rational, orderly, "systems analysis" approach to the sprawling, unwieldy Defense Department. "It was a very exciting time, it really was. We were all young—we didn't know yet that we couldn't turn the world around."

Today, at 43, Selin is the chairman of a business he and four other former whiz kids set up 11 years ago. All five are worth over a million dollars each and their business is very successful. A lot of the former whiz kids are very successful, and last night about 80 of them held a reunion, the first since their glory days as brash young men scurrying down the long corridors of the Pentagon. They came in from as far away as Seattle and San Francisco and Houston to attend the reunion, catching up on new times and remembering old.

"It was fashionable to be a defense intellectual in the 1960s," Selin said. "There was a large store of good people to choose from and a lot of important work being done."

It became less fashionable when the war in Vietnam—which these whiz kids say they had little to do with—began commandeering the headlines and the passions of the American public. But for a time "systems analysis" was a new religion, and its disciples were fired with the energy of true believers.

At the time, "systems analysis" was considered revolutionary, because it changed the way of deciding how the money was allocated, and what programs were worth keeping, starting or enhancing. It was an effort to anticipate answers to questions that hadn't been asked, or help decide what questions should be asked, in part by breaking large problems into component parts. "Systems analysis was controversial because it was an independent view, across all the services . . .," said Adm. Thor Hanson, who was a Navy officer dispatched to the whiz kids team. The brass of the Navy, Army, Air Force and Marines had been used to divvying up the budget through the customary system of horsetrading and politicking, and suddenly there were young civilians talking about "cost-benefit ratios," "program analysis," "inputs" and so forth.

"The idea was to bring cost effectiveness to the Pentagon," said Alain Enthoven, considered to be the "intellectual father" of systems analysis, who is now a professor at Stanford University. "We try to illuminate the problems for the people who have to make the decisions . . . It's not computers, it's not quantifying things and it's not a substitute for judgment."

On one level, it was a conflict between experience and data, between the belief that things could be measured, factored, added up and compared, and the imprecise urges of intuition and habit. "In the whole history of warfare, people associated with a particular type of arms always think that kind of arms is the best," Enthoven said. "The French knights in the 14th century were convinced that the knight on horseback was the ultimate weapon. They thought the English longbow was threatening because it was different."

"We were saying 'Why?,' said Bernard Rostker, now director of the Selective Service Commission. "A general would say I want such and such and Alain would say, 'Why?'"

The whiz kids, wrote Theodore H. White in a 1963 article, were "interested in war as a system of intellectual propositions, most at home with chalk and a blackboard." They were the succeeding generation to the "quiz kids" that McNamara led to the Ford Motor Co. in 1947—people he worked with teaching "statistical control" to the Army Air Forces during World War II, who were able, by some accounts, to rescue the company from a post-war crisis. When McNamara was appointed to Defense he had been president of Ford for barely six weeks. In his first years at the Defense Department he became known as the "human IBM machine," a man who within six weeks of taking office issued a list of 96 questions he wanted answered, with the name of the person responsible for the answer and the deadlines for it. His staff once calculated that he made 629 major decisions in one month.

The Pentagon whiz kids were generally civilians, although the military had their people, like Hanson, assigned to systems analysis work. The boss, Enthoven, became a deputy assistant secretary of defense, which is the federal government way of giving something status. Many of the systems analysis people (the reunion sponsors located about 400 who worked at the Pentagon between 1962 and 1968) were, like Selin, veterans of the Rand Corp., economists and engineers, and generally they were achievers without prestigious family backgrounds to grease their way.

"This was before Vietnam blew up into a big thing," said Selin. The alumni who were invited to last night's reunion at the Fort McNair Officers Club included men successful in business, politics, government, the military and academia: Harold Brown became secretary of defense. Stansfield Turner became director of the CIA. Les Aspin became a representative from Wisconsin. Thor Hanson is a three-star admiral and director of the staff for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Donald Rice is president of the Rand Corp. Staser Holcomb is an admiral and the head of program planning for the Navy. Wayne Smith is a partner in Coopers and Lybrand. Steven Fenster is a partner at Lehman Brothers. Robert McNamara is president of the World Bank until he retires in June.

"Most of them say they didn't have much to do with the war in Vietnam. They were trying to keep the peacetime operations going.

"There's an insufficient sense of guilt," said Selin. "We were around, we were in the Pentagon, everything we did was fine, but why weren't we more aggressive when such a terrible thing was going on, in getting involved in that? You'll find it's not a terribly introspective, guilt-laden group. It's an upwardly mobile, generally quite successful set of people . . ."

McNamara, who sent a telegram saying he could not attend last night's reunion because of his wife's illness, won't discuss those times. Once lauded as an example of the best that America could produce, his star diminished as the debacle in Southeast Asia became apparent. He was criticized for dryly spewing out facts and figures. "McNamara Get Human," read a placard in one of the early antiwar marches.

"If you want to say he didn't understand Vietnam very well—well, nobody else did, either," said Enthoven. "Unfortunately, a lot of other people were able to rewrite history and make him out to be the bad guy." Later, in remarks to the group, Enthoven called McNamara "one of the greatest public servants this nation has ever seen . . . I feel great pride whenever I hear that magical name or when I am introduced as having been associated with him. It's like saying 'He was with King Henry at Agincourt.'"

The whiz kids are familiar with the charge that they were so self-righteous about the wizardry of numbers that they ignored people. "It was a missionary job. You have to be somewhat overzealous when you're starting a new religion. I hate to use this phrase—but now they're all Christians, now we're teaching them theology as opposed to bringing monotheism to the natives," said Selin.

The systems analysis office had an uneven life after McNamara left. The Nixon White House reduced its status. "Nixon said he wanted to get rid of the whiz-kid type of government," said Jan Lodal, one of Selin's partners. "And then Kissinger turned around and hired three of us during the next eight years to be his assistant for program analysis." Now the office in the Pentagon is called "P.A.E., for program analysis and evaluation," and is secure "for at least the next four days," said alumnus Russell Murray, who heads the office as an assistant secretary of defense.

The ideas and ways of doing things have left a lasting legacy, say the former whiz kids. "We helped to build a permanent and substantial raising of the intellectual quality of dialogue over defense issues," Enthoven told the group. ". . . We have gone on to contribute to society in many varied ways," he said, listing the political, academic and business successes of the group sitting in front of him. "Still, there just hasn't been anything quite like it." And then he recalled a few verses from Shakespeare's "Henry V," those that begin "Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, But he'll remember with advantages what feats he did . . ." The speech continues, of course, "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers."

"We had the feeling we were working really hard, doing useful, in some cases revolutionary things," said Selin. "In no other alternate life, only at this particular time trajectory in this particular universe, would people as young as we were have the chance to do such responsible things. I'm very proud of what we did."

From left, Alain Enthoven, Stansfield Turner and Ivan Selin; by Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post