THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Hagiography of Mr. Holbrooke

Review

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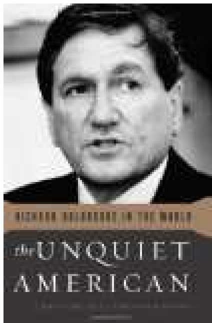
April 25, 2012

Derek Chollet and Samantha Power, eds., *The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011), 400 pp., $29.99.



The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World WHEN RICHARD Holbrooke died unexpectedly in December 2010, he left behind a large contingent of friends and admirers who revered the man, his contributions in the realm of foreign policy and his geopolitical outlook. This memorial volume gives testament to that esteem by presenting essays by friends and colleagues as well as Holbrooke's own writings over the decades. Editors Derek Chollet and Samantha Power succeed in providing a reasonably insightful portrait of Holbrooke the man as well as the foreign policy that he both shaped and embodied.

But a corrective is in order. Holbrooke's actions and philosophy were problematic in many ways. It does no great service to Holbrooke, and certainly not to his country, to modulate or ignore the controversy generated by his particular geopolitical views—or, for that matter, by the brash, impatient and often bullying demeanor he projected in the course of his official duties. Whatever one thinks of his philosophy or his personal style, it can't be denied that Holbrooke was a powerful figure who left a large mark, for good and ill, on American foreign policy.

In providing a window into Holbrooke's foreign-policy views and objectives, *The Unquiet American* also sheds light on the foreign policy of the Democratic Party's liberal establishment. Holbrooke was in many respects a poster boy for that faction of America's foreign-policy elite. His career highlights both the strengths and weaknesses, mostly the latter, of that elevated element of officialdom. Gordon M. Goldstein observes in his contribution to the book that the younger generation of policy makers and scholars emerging from the Vietnam War (the group that the late *New York Times* columnist William Safire aptly dubbed "the new-boy network") "remained central to Holbrooke's life in the decades that followed. And to a remarkable degree, Holbrooke's circle of intimate colleagues from that chapter would go on to shape the U.S. foreign policy establishment in the post-Vietnam era."

The role of Holbrooke and other liberal foreign-policy figures is not just a matter of academic or historical interest. Obama administration officials obtain their views from that same intellectual wellspring and embody similar values and prejudices. Thus, the worldview of the Democratic establishment is likely to guide Washington's foreign policy as long as the current administration remains in power—and in any other Democratic administration in the foreseeable future. One can almost sense Holbrooke's ghost hovering. And it is a ghost with some hard and sharp edges.

Several essays in this book confirm what many people in Washington already knew: Richard Holbrooke was not an easy man to like. Although Strobe Talbott argues in his contribution that Holbrooke did not fit the stereotype of either the "Quiet American" or the "Ugly American," he was closer to the latter than the former. One of his nicknames, "The Bulldozer," captured his utter lack of subtlety and finesse. This bulldozer approach proved particularly damaging when he served President Obama as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. He alienated rather than intimidated the prickly government and tribal leaders in those countries.

A Holbrooke trait described by Power illustrates his rampantly egotistical persona. "Richard Holbrooke could be crushingly blunt," she writes:

When he came over for dinner, he would take up the whole meal venting about the inanities of the bureaucracy he served, but then yawn ostentatiously when it took his dinner companions longer than a couple of sentences to get to the point.

Yet he did possess some redeeming qualities. During one of the periods when his Democratic Party was out of power and he did not hold appointive office, Holbrooke worked tirelessly to focus greater attention on the aids epidemic in Africa, even though he received little notice or credit for his efforts. The same was true of his actions to secure the release of journalist David Rohde and others who found themselves held hostage in perilous situations.

A unique feature of Holbrooke's career is that he served both as assistant secretary of state for East Asia (in the Carter administration) and for Europe (in the Clinton administration). His early career prepared him far more for the former post than the latter.

His initial assignment was as a young Foreign Service officer in South Vietnam, where he loyally attempted to execute Washington's counterinsurgency and nation-building strategy. That experience sobered Holbrooke to some extent, and as the chapter that he wrote for the Pentagon Papers revealed, he had concluded by the late 1960s that the war in Vietnam was unwinnable. Goldstein's chapter on that phase of his life is one of the stronger contributions to *The Unquiet American*.

But, typically, even the valid lessons that Holbrooke learned from Vietnam tended to be limited. To the end of his days, he remained committed to the concept of nation building, as evidenced by his April 2002 article in the *Washington Post*, "Rebuilding Nations." His criticism of the Vietnam venture was not that the policy of U.S. paternalistic meddling and imperial social engineering was fatally flawed but only that a better strategy—and especially better execution—was needed. His enthusiasm for the nation-building crusades in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan demonstrated all too well the narrow extent of the lessons he took away from the Vietnam debacle.

The wisdom of Holbrooke's views and prescriptions regarding other elements of U.S. policy in East Asia was decidedly uneven. He admired the Nixon-Kissinger decision to unfreeze relations with China. Later, as assistant secretary of state, he helped guide the Carter administration through its policy shift of transferring U.S. diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing—in the face of perilous congressional hostility and vigorous opposition from Taiwan.

There were also early hints of new, refreshing thinking about U.S. relations with South Korea and especially the U.S. military presence in that country. While he was out of office during the Ford years, Holbrooke advocated the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Korea. As a Carter administration official, though, he reversed course and joined the contingent of diplomatic and military personnel who feverishly lobbied President Carter to abandon his plans to do just that. Unfortunately, Richard Bernstein's otherwise solid chapter gives little insight into why Holbrooke's views changed so dramatically.

One explanation is that he changed his mind after studying the issue in greater depth and honestly concluded that a troop withdrawal would pose serious, unanticipated dangers to important American interests. Or perhaps some sentiments of opportunism emerged when he discovered the extent of opposition to the shift from both the military leadership and senior Democrats. Holbrooke's admirers readily concede his unwavering ambition was to become secretary of state in some future Democratic administration.

But whatever the underlying sentiments, Holbrooke's ultimate position on the troop presence in South Korea and overall U.S. security policy in East Asia exemplified the myopic, conventional wisdom of the Democratic Party's foreign-policy establishment—and, indeed, the bipartisan foreign-policy consensus. It was revealing that Holbrooke admired South Korean president Park Chung-hee's success in persuading Carter that it would be dangerous not only for South Korea but also for Washington's position and reputation in East Asia and the western Pacific if the proposed troop withdrawal proceeded.

One wonders what Holbrooke and other foreign-policy activists expected Park to say. Two iconoclastic experts on Korean issues—Edward Olsen, a professor emeritus at the Naval Postgraduate School, and Doug Bandow, a former assistant to President Reagan—pointed out that the U.S. military presence confirmed Washington's willingness to continue providing a major component of South Korea's defense. That constituted a multibillion-dollar annual subsidy that enabled Seoul to spend far less on its military than prudent national-security considerations regarding the North Korean threat would dictate if South Korea had to take care of its own defense needs. Such cynical free riding was still apparent in the late 1980s when Bandow attended a conference in Seoul and suggested that the time was overdue for South Korea to phase out its military dependence on the United States. A leading South Korean participant sputtered that the government didn't want to do that because "we have domestic needs." Park Chung-hee and his successors were not about to give up that robust U.S. defense subsidy, and their American enablers have allowed the free riding to continue to the present day.

The unwillingness (or inability) of the dominant faction in America's foreign-policy community to envision a more limited, prudent and sustainable role for the United States in East Asia is also evident in its relations with Japan. Holbrooke described the U.S. role since 1945 as "demicolonial," protecting the noncommunist states in the region from aggression and creating a framework that enabled those countries to pursue economic growth and political stability. To his credit, during his stint as assistant secretary of state in the late 1970s, he recognized that the traditional pattern of the demicolonial policy was already coming to an end.

But, once again, the limits to his analysis were on display. Yes, he (and some other officials) wanted Japan to play a slightly larger political and even military role, but it was always merely as Washington's strictly controlled junior partner. Holbrooke regarded the notion of Tokyo playing a significantly more robust, much less an independent, role as dangerous radicalism that would threaten to destabilize the entire region. Such crabbed thinking three decades after World War II was already obsolete. Worse still, this thinking would persist far beyond the 1970s. The Pentagon's 1995 and 1998 planning-guidance documents for East Asia still epitomized a barely concealed worry about a revival of Japanese militarism and saw the United States as the only power that could or should protect the peace and stability of the region.

HOLBROOKE'S LIMITED inclination to change U.S. policy in East Asia, though, was a model of shrewd, insightful statesmanship compared to his performance when he became assistant secretary of state for European affairs during the Clinton years. He acknowledged that he did not have extensive knowledge of European issues or much preparation for that post, and his performance in office demonstrated the adage that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

The quality of the chapters in *The Unquiet American* regarding that portion of Holbrooke's career is as frustrating and disappointing as his record. Roger Cohen's contribution, "Holbrooke, a European Power," manages to recapitulate nearly every liberal-interventionist cliché concerning both the enlargement of NATO and the Bosnian

war, Holbrooke's two priorities during those years. Derek Chollet's chapter on the road to the Dayton accords is only marginally better.

Holbrooke, an early and vocal enthusiast for the expansion of NATO, argued that it would stabilize Central and Eastern Europe and, together with the expansion of other Western institutions, especially the European Union, would create the political, security and economic framework for a whole and democratic Europe. Like most proponents of enlargement, he greatly overstated both the importance of enlargement to America's own interests and the probable benefits to the United States. In his article in the March–April 1995 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Holbrooke blithely described America as a European power and argued that the welfare of Central and Eastern European states was vital to this country's own security and well-being.

As with so many advocates of NATO expansion, Holbrooke misconstrued America's geostrategic position. The United States is not and never has been a "European power." It is an external power that has some European interests. That may be a subtle distinction, but it is extremely important. It argues against any legitimate reason for Washington to attempt to micromanage Europe's affairs, which is what Holbrooke's approach inevitably entailed. Taking on an assortment of mostly small security clients, several of which have tense relations with neighboring countries, especially Russia, created liabilities for the United States, not assets.

Holbrooke and his allies responded dismissively to prescient warnings that NATO expansion would not only expose the United States to needless security headaches but would also poison relations with Moscow. He and other proponents of expansion audaciously argued that it would actually benefit Russia by creating greater stability on its western flank. Not surprisingly, Moscow saw matters differently—as an attempt by the United States and its allies to take advantage of Russia's weakness in the initial post–Cold War decade and expand Western power into a traditional Russian sphere of influence.

In his 1995 *Foreign Affairs* article, reprinted in *The Unquiet American*, Holbrooke argued, "Expansion of NATO is a logical and essential consequence of the disappearance of the Iron Curtain." It was, but not in the way he believed. Holbrooke contended that it provided an opportunity to widen European unity based on shared democratic values. Christopher Layne, a professor at Texas A & M University, put it far more accurately in his important book, *The Peace of Illusions*. The demise of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, Layne argued, created a power vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe that the sole remaining superpower, the United States, saw an irresistible opportunity to fill. The expansion of a U.S.-dominated NATO was the perfect vehicle to achieve that goal at the expense of the defeated adversary, Moscow. What occurred with NATO expansion, Layne contended, was a real-world application of offensive-realist theory. Specifically, both Washington's concept of its European interests and its determination to pursue those interests expanded once the Soviet Union no longer constrained U.S. power. The tendency of Holbrooke and his colleagues to cloak NATO's enlargement in benevolent, moralistic garb was either self-deception or propaganda.

As Russia gradually recovered its economic and military strength, it predictably pushed back against U.S. and NATO ambitions. Moscow's very effective campaign to regain political influence in Ukraine and the nasty little war waged against Georgia to secure the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia sent a message to Washington that the West's penetration into Russia's backyard had reached its limits. It is revealing that the bold talk of extending NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia, so prominent a few years ago, has largely disappeared.

Because Holbrooke and most foreign-policy opinion leaders in the Democratic Party accepted the fallacy that the United States is a European power, it was not surprising that they wanted decisive U.S. action in Bosnia. Holbrooke insisted that the bloodshed there was taking place "in the heart of Europe." That characterization was wrong in terms of biology, geography and history. Bosnia and the rest of the Balkans are more accurately viewed as Europe's infected hangnail, not its heart. Although developments there might be painful and annoying, they are hardly critical to the Continent's future. Otto von Bismarck aptly observed that the Balkans were not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. That was true for continental Europe's leading power in the late nineteenth century, and it is even truer for a distant power such as the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Not only did Holbrooke and many other prominent American foreign-policy figures overstate Bosnia's importance to the United States, but their view of the triangular ethnic conflict there was (and largely remains) a simplistic melodrama. "My generation," Holbrooke wrote, "had been taught in school that Munich and the Holocaust were the benchmark horrors of the 1930s. Leaders of the Atlantic alliance had repeatedly pledged it would never happen again. Yet between 1991 and 1995 it *did* happen again."

The equation of the mundane Bosnian civil war with the Holocaust was absurd, but that was the image that drove U.S. policy. The three-year armed conflict, while tragic, produced barely one hundred thousand casualties (including military personnel) on all sides. And yet it became the moral equivalent of Hitler's extermination of millions of innocents. Advocates of Western intervention augmented that perversion of history with a propaganda campaign that portrayed the complex, multisided fight as a stark case of aggression and genocide that evil Serbs perpetrated against innocent Muslims. (A similar, grotesque interpretation would dominate the U.S. view of the murky Kosovo struggle later in the 1990s.)

Holbrooke's admirers consider his negotiation (in reality, imposition) of the Dayton accords the crowning achievement of his career. That was true in the sense that his labors ended the armed struggle. But Dayton also created an utterly dysfunctional state from which two of the three antagonistic ethnic groups, the Serbs and Croats (together just over 50 percent of the population), would secede even today if allowed to do so. Moreover, Bosnia remains a perpetual economic basket case and international ward that is no closer to being a viable country now than it was when the Dayton accords were signed in December 1995.

Showing his persistent nation-building tendencies, Holbrooke recognized Dayton's flaws and grew ever more impatient about them. Derek Chollet notes that Holbrooke described his position as "maximalist" and "worked to forge an agreement that would create a unified, democratic, multiethnic, and tolerant Bosnia." But his proposed solution—one that a major portion of the foreign-policy community still pushes—was to have the Western powers strengthen Bosnia's central government by fiat. The assumption of nation builders is that such measures would (somehow) produce the requisite unity to enable Bosnia to function as a cohesive, effective state. It is more likely that such a strategy would intensify simmering ethnic tensions and perhaps even trigger a new war.

PERHAPS THE most telling feature of Holbrooke's worldview is how closely he adhered to the conventional wisdom of America's foreign-policy elite that the United States is the indispensible nation in the international system. Some senior Democrats inexplicably regarded Holbrooke as a radical in the 1970s. Richard Bernstein relates that Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national-security adviser, "genuinely disliked Holbrooke, apparently believing . . . that he and his group were 'left-wing nuts.'" Yet Holbrooke never questioned the prevailing national narcissism about America's presumedly irreplaceable world role. Neither have most of his colleagues and admirers.

In that sense, there was not much difference between Holbrooke and the neoconservatives that he often criticized. The difference was more of style than substance. Holbrooke, like most liberal Democrats, preferred to have the United States pursue its foreign-policy objectives within a multilateral framework whenever possible. Neoconservatives, in contrast, are usually ostentatious advocates of unilateralism. Not only do such leading neoconservative figures as William Kristol, John Bolton and Charles Krauthammer exhibit contempt for the United Nations, they tend to view NATO and other alliances as being useful only if the other members follow Washington's policy preferences without a murmur of protest.

Holbrooke and his liberal allies regarded that approach as crude and counterproductive. But he was never a devout multilateralist, much less a member of the quasi-pacifist contingent that backed George McGovern's presidential candidacy so enthusiastically in 1972. That point became clear on numerous occasions, especially during Holbrooke's tenure as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations from 1999–2001. Although he argued that the UN could, and often did, serve U.S. interests, he also emphasized that no international body should control Washington's actions.

Distancing himself from those who, he believed, held a "romanticized view" of the United Nations, Holbrooke noted in a November 1999 speech at the National Press Club that the United States had "other vital instruments of national power at our disposal." Such capabilities were "demonstrated quite amply twice in the last four years: in Bosnia, where NATO, led by the United States, bombed and sent in a NATO-led force without UN authority; and in Kosovo, where the bombing again took place without UN authority." He added tellingly: "I would advocate similar actions again unhesitatingly if it were in the national interest."

In other words, Holbrooke, like other liberal interventionists such as Madeleine Albright, saw the United Nations—and, for that matter, other multilateral organizations—as an occasionally useful foreign-policy tool, or at least a convenient fig leaf, for Washington's foreign-policy objectives. But such liberals did not flinch from bypassing such institutions to pursue very broadly defined national interests.

Holbrooke's general preference for U.S. activism, within or outside a multilateral framework, underscored his reflexive view of the United States as the world's one indispensible nation. That attitude was evident in his assumption that a significantly stronger and more active Japan should not become the primary force for security and stability in East Asia. He insisted that only America could, or should, play that role—even in the twenty-first century. Holbrooke preferred a similar static paradigm for Europe in the twenty-first century. Embracing the view that the United States was the only country capable of providing the appropriate security framework for the Continent, he revealed an interesting blind spot. "If the United States does not lead, its European allies could falter as they did in the early part of this decade," Holbrooke wrote in the pages of the *New Yorker* in 1998. On other occasions, he sneered at Europe's lack of any credible military capability to back up its diplomatic pretensions.

But as Alan Tonelson, a research fellow at the U.S. Business and Industry Council Educational Foundation, observed more than a decade ago, the lack of European (and East Asian) military capabilities is largely because of the "smothering strategy" that Washington has employed since the end of World War II. Not only did the United States take on a dominant role in the security affairs of both regions, but it also *insisted* on maintaining that preeminence. U.S. officials made it clear early and often that they did not view favorably independent security initiatives by their allies. Washington's opposition to a substantially larger Japanese security role has already been noted, but the hostility to the European Union's periodic flirtation with developing an independent military capacity was equally intense.

The insistence on U.S. primacy creates a massive incentive for European and East Asian allies to take a free ride on America's defense exertions. As Cato Institute scholar Christopher Preble argues in *The Power Problem*, that arrangement has been a very good deal for taxpayers in allied countries. But it has produced two pernicious effects. One is that the allied free riding is an extremely bad deal for U.S. taxpayers. On a per capita basis, Americans pay four to five times as much in military spending as citizens in major European and East Asian allied countries. Even worse, the outsized U.S. security role has fostered an unhealthy, dependent mentality on the part of governments and populations in both regions. The European "fecklessness" that Holbrooke and his colleagues lamented regarding the growing turmoil in the Balkans during the 1990s was a direct—indeed, inevitable—consequence of the U.S. smothering strategy.

Incentives matter in foreign policy as much as they do in domestic policy. It was unrealistic for Holbrooke and others to insist that America is the indispensible nation and then complain about the lack of preparation or initiative on the part of the allies. That is the price of U.S. narcissism, and it is a price that grows ever larger as Washington retains

all of its Cold War–era security responsibilities while adding new ones around the world. It is also a price that grows ever more burdensome as America's fiscal and economic woes mount. It is bizarre, for example, that we are now borrowing money from China so that we can continue defending such nations as Japan and South Korea—at least in part against a possible Chinese security threat.

Richard Holbrooke was among a handful of extremely important and influential American foreign-policy figures of the past half century. As *The Unquiet American* demonstrates, he especially made his mark on policy with respect to East Asia and Europe. But his legacy is a mixed one with more negative than positive features. Ultimately, that disappointing record was due less to his own deficiencies than to the sterile, static worldview that characterizes so much of America's foreign-policy establishment. The limited nature of the "debate" within that community about America's appropriate diplomatic and military role in the world has been akin to an excruciatingly boring football game played only between the forty-yard lines.

Bold, new—and badly needed—ideas rarely emanate from the foreign-policy establishment that Richard Holbrooke embodied. *The Unquiet American* demonstrates that worrisome reality with unintended clarity.