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“The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World”

By Michael Getler, Published: November 11

Last month marked the 10th anniversary of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Nobody knows when it will end or when America's role there will be finished.

This month marks the publication of a new book, “The Unquiet American,” a remembrance of Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke. He was a one-of-a-kind diplomat whose almost 50-year career spanned modern U.S. history and wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan, and who died suddenly nearly one year ago while at work on his last assignment as President Obama's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Holbrooke was “special” and he was an “envoy,” and, mostly through the force of his own determination and resourcefulness, combined with the steady backing of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, he achieved important milestones in the seemingly intractable effort to bring stability to Pakistan and peace to Afghanistan.

But his title — special envoy — never seemed to fit exactly right. As his longtime friend and former State Department colleague Strobe Talbott writes in one of the book's essays: “It was the worst-kept secret in Washington that [Obama] never acquired a taste for Richard's operating style. That wasn't surprising, given Obama's signature preference for ‘no drama.’ Life with Richard was nothing if not dramatic.”

Talbott reports what also became well known at the time: that in 2010, the president's then-national security adviser, retired Marine Corps Gen. Jim Jones, tried to get Holbrooke fired. But Clinton intervened. Seven months later, it was Jones who was gone.

In another essay, David Rohde, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who covered Holbrooke's work in Bosnia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, who was captured twice while reporting on those conflicts, and who credits Holbrooke with helping save him in both episodes, writes that “his perceived competitiveness with his peers compounded suspicions in Washington.”

“In theory,” Rohde writes, “Holbrooke should have been at the zenith of his diplomatic skills and career. Decades of work in Washington and war zones had prepared him for what he called his last mission.” Alas, that was not to be. He died on Dec. 13, 2010, of complications from surgery to repair a torn aorta. He was 69.

This is an important, timely and imaginative book, a collection of essays from friends, colleagues, journalists and academics who knew Holbrooke well and observed him closely. It is therefore, in one sense, a memorial or a celebration of someone “whose presence is sorely missed,” as co-editors Derek Chollet, author of a book on the Dayton Accords, and Samantha Power, a Pulitzer-winning author and special assistant to Obama, write in the preface. But it is also about someone “whose contributions are known in silhouette but — with the lone exception of his role in ending the war in Bosnia — in surprisingly sparse detail.”

That is true. Holbrooke is most well-known for his central role in forging and forcing a peace agreement among the warring factions in Bosnia in 1995, ending the worst conflict on European soil since World War II, and for insisting on the use of U.S. and NATO air power to make that happen.

But this volume takes us from Holbrooke’s time as a 22-year-old foreign service officer in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta in 1963, through the Paris peace talks that sought to end the war, to his writing a central chapter of the then-secret history of that war, later known as the Pentagon Papers. He served four Democratic presidents, became the youngest assistant secretary of state and held that office twice for different presidents, once for Europe and once for Asia. He became ambassador to Germany and to the United Nations, where he got the United States to pay its back dues. He was a central figure in helping global refugees, battling AIDS and lots of other things.

He was a prolific writer, combative conversationalist and negotiator; thought deeply about U.S. policy; was convinced of America’s special role in global and human affairs; had a big ego; and seemed to know all of the world’s journalists. He never got the brass ring of secretary of state, or the Nobel Peace Prize, but he was certainly among the most important American diplomats in living memory, his presence notable for a generation rather than merely the lifespan of an administration.

The essays are interspersed, cleverly, by Holbrooke’s writings — memos, diary entries, articles, book excerpts, op-eds — that illuminate his thinking and capture a breadth beyond that of the clever brawler. He was in essence a diplomat-correspondent, always driven to be on the scene and to write about it.

Richard Bernstein, a New York Times and Time magazine reporter, notes that much of what Holbrooke was involved with seemed to build upon and prefigure what came next. And that is what haunts this book: a sense of how Holbrooke’s experiences in Vietnam hovered in the background of what he was witnessing in Afghanistan — a cross-border sanctuary for the enemy, a corrupt government and a questionable counterinsurgency strategy on the ground.

But beyond that, the collective impact of these essays is to present readers with a question that is never asked and can’t be answered: What might have been? Even though U.S. power is not what it was in 1995, when Holbrooke could intimidate Balkan leaders, could his unique experience and dedication to what history teaches have been used more effectively?

Those questions are, of course, speculative. But the book takes readers through a smart and fast-paced history of half a century with Holbrooke — who, like some diplomatic Zelig, was always on the crucial scene. And it leaves us with lots of material with which to ponder a more personal question: Would U.S. policy in Afghanistan have been more successful if the relationship between Holbrooke and Obama had been more successful?

Holbrooke was not naive about Afghanistan and clearly understood the differences from, as well as the similarities to, Vietnam. He did not oppose the troop surge there but thought that smaller numbers were better, and he argued that civilian assistance and negotiations with the Taliban, rather than a military solution, would ultimately yield better results. His personality, at times, got in the way both here and in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The souring of the relationship between Holbrooke and the president and some of his top aides is laid out in much more detail elsewhere, reportorially in Bob Woodward’s latest book, “Obama’s Wars,” but more personally and analytically in an appreciation written by Holbrooke’s very close friend and former colleague at State, Leslie Gelb. It appeared in the Daily Beast < in January and would have made a fine contribution to “The Unquiet American.”

“Why Holbrooke stayed on given Obama’s attitude toward him and the virtual impossibility of the task . . . is very complicated,” Gelb wrote. “Holbrooke was loyal to the president. He never said a bad word about him to me, a quite unusual occurrence. But the chemistry didn’t work between them. Dick, as was his custom with superiors, flattered Obama excessively. Dick also ‘lectured’ him, and the president is the kind of guy who felt he ought to be doing the lecturing. It was a clash as well of two very powerful intellects. Obama could have learned a lot from Holbrooke, but wasn’t disposed to do so. The result was that Holbrooke wasn’t given the power of the Oval Office in doing his job. Characteristic of the man, if he couldn’t do his work one way, he would search for others. But it was hard.”

Michael Getler is the ombudsman at PBS. He was a reporter, editor and ombudsman at The Washington Post and editor of the International Herald Tribune.