

Book Review: *Our Man. Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century.* By George Packer. Knopf. 592 pages. \$30.

By Michael D. Mosettig

Much of this biography of America's most turbo-charged diplomat (he served Democratic presidents in Washington from Johnson through Obama, using Republican respites to build some wealth on Wall Street) follows the arc of the twin tragedies of this country's Asian misadventures from Vietnam to Afghanistan. But in between there was Europe. There Richard Holbrooke's major achievement—the Dayton Peace Accords that ended the worst European war since 1945—still endures, in however a tenuous state.

Holbrooke, the son of immigrants from Poland and Germany (his father found the name in a New York telephone book) began his diplomatic career in Vietnam's Mekong Delta in 1963. His life ended 48 years later as the State Department Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. To the talented biographer George Packer, it is a span that symbolizes the waning of American power.

In between there was as much history and drama, some played out in serious newspapers and television programs, some in the New York tabloids, as any one life could contain. It ricocheted both among the men and women he worked with and for and the women, including the three he married, he loved. Indeed Holbrooke's closest friend, author and analyst Les Gelb, said the life should be set in a novel, not a biography. Holbrooke had a capacity for intense loyalty to and from superiors and subordinates. Colleagues of the same level were too often perceived as rivals and from those rivalries endless and debilitating dislikes and hatreds developed.

In Packer, Holbrooke has found a worthy biographer. An author of several books on U.S. policy and politics, he more than grasps the issues and personalities in Holbrooke's life. As a resident of New York, he is sufficiently removed to avoid being consumed in Washington's self-important nonsense, especially that of more recent decades.

Indeed there is one paragraph that probably should be banned on university campuses if we want our most talented youth to think about lives in government service:

“ It is hard to understand if you've never been on the inside, but that the level where big decisions are made, government work can destroy people. It destroyed (Defense Secretary) Les Aspin, who wept and begged Clinton not to let him go and was dead of a stroke in fifteen months. Officials work killing hard under nonstop pressure for relatively low pay....They endure fourteen-hour days, endless meetings, mountains of paperwork and a merciless press. But their egos, largely by definition, find no objective standard to measure their performance—no annual bonus, popular

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vote, batting average, best-seller list—so they have to look for other ways, demeaning ones to assure themselves that they're on top: office location, high-level meetings, presidential favor. The only way they can be sure of doing well is at the expense of others...So the nation's vital business is carried out amid humiliating pettiness."

Holbrooke's 1994 return to the sixth floor of the State Department, as assistant secretary for Europe, and where in the Carter Administration he had been assistant secretary for East Asia, was a result of a combination of luck and disaster.

He arrived in Washington from Germany, where he had served as President Clinton's first ambassador. That service rates a few pages, most notably for his role in establishing the American Academy outside of Berlin and where top American authors and artists can work and interact with appreciative Germans. Its creation in the early 1990s was a reflection of Holbrooke's historical sense that the U.S. should leave a permanent reminder of its post-war role in Germany once the last U.S. troops had paraded out of Berlin.

And I and my NewsHour colleagues may have played a bit part in Holbrooke's promotion back to Washington. His predecessor, Stephen Oxman, was a one-time aide to Secretary of State Warren Christopher and a Wall Streeter, who was confronted with the unfolding disaster in the former Yugoslavia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In August 1993 he came on the NewsHour and could not give direct answers to the direct questions of anchor Roger Mudd. It was one of several steps out the door.

Christopher only hired Holbrooke under pressure from two deputies, Strobe Talbott and Tom Donilon. When he reluctantly agreed, because he neither liked nor trusted Holbrooke, it was with the proviso: "Okay, I'll hire him. But he's your problem."

And for another 100 pages, the author describes in exquisite but agonizing detail how the governments of the United States and major western European nations were forced by events and Holbrooke's personality to come to stop their floundering and come to grips with Bosnia. By November 1995, after weeks of negotiations at an air force base in Dayton, Ohio, and just as the leaders of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, much less the assembled diplomats from Washington and Europe, were about ready to abandon the effort, a ceasefire and peace pact were sealed.

Packer more than acknowledges that Holbrooke could resort to bullying and bulldozer tactics attached to American power. They seemed perfectly suited to the Yugoslov political terrain and personalities (and would prove far less so in Afghanistan and Pakistan). But he quotes Bosnia leader Alija Izetbegovich, who did like Holbrooke, to give the most fitting appraisal:

"They say that diplomacy and power are two ends of the scale. The more power you have, the less diplomacy you need. In the extreme case –if you are a superpower—you don't need diplomacy of

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any kind. Holbrooke gave lie to this theory. Although he represented the greatest superpower—in fact, the only superpower in the world—he was to the fullest extent a diplomat and used his persuasive skills like the most powerful of weapons.”

Dayton was a triumph, though as the author says, one that survives but diminishes over time amidst unending Yugoslav rivalries and grievances. Yet its conclusion revealed the other Holbrooke, his intensive but failed lobbying for the Nobel Peace Prize. And it did not bring his most cherished life goal, to be Secretary of State.

At the beginning of his second term, President Clinton gave the job to Madeleine Albright. Sadly, their contempt for each other drips through this book, even as Holbrooke took the job Albright previously held, as UN Ambassador. (Several key characters in this book are children of Central European immigrants whose parents hid or masked their Jewish roots).

As the author concludes, the good and bad of Holbrooke were inseparable. One could not have existed without the other.

In some ways, the hardest chapters to read (and I knew him only slightly) are the final ones. Holbrooke was increasingly desperate, isolated both among Afghans and Pakistanis and worse in a new generation of Obama era American leaders and policy makers who did not want to hear any more about the lessons of Vietnam. And his health deteriorating until his aorta tore in the office of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in December 2010.

It is hard to imagine another biographer tackling this life any time soon. Maybe, as Gelb suggested, novelists will try. The material will be richer (both with Holbrooke and his third wife Kati Marton) for one or several playwrights who have the grasp of history of Shakespeare, the grasp of psychodrama of Edward Albee and the grasp of tragedy of Aeschylus.

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