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On the Ground

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF



December 13, 2010, 9:46 pm

Richard Holbrooke, RIP

By [NICHOLAS KRISTOF](#)

I've never met an abler diplomat, or a smarter one, than Richard Holbrooke. He was inevitably the brightest guy in the room, and usually the most pragmatic and hardest-working – and he was also a friend whom I admired hugely. His death today is a tremendous loss for all of us who knew him, and for the country as well. Richard never achieved his dream of becoming secretary of state, but he leaves a legacy around the world – from Bosnia to East Timor, from AIDS clinics in South Africa to his legions of followers in the United States – that exceeds that of many Secretaries of State. He was simply a legendary public servant, and an inspiration.

I met Richard two decades ago when I was a China correspondent for the New York Times, and he came through Beijing on his way to Tibet. In the intervening years I learned an immense amount from him, and I came to have vast admiration for his combination of public service ideals and gritty can-do pragmatism.

It's well-known that he could be abrasive, and he rubbed some people the wrong way. But what's sometimes missed is that abrasiveness was usually serving some cause; it wasn't just him trying to get his way. Quite regularly when I would write about AIDS, I would get a reproachful call from Richard. "So, why didn't you mention testing?" he would ask. As chairman of the Global Business Coalition against AIDS, he was among the first to appreciate the importance of widespread testing for HIV, on the theory that you couldn't constrain the epidemic until you knew who had it. And so once he understood that, he pushed and persuaded and bullied to get more testing. For my part, persuaded and bullied by Richard, I began to mention testing more often – and my readers and the public were better off for it.

There are lots of people who manage to get one big thing right in their careers, but Richard managed to be right and ahead of his time about any number of topics. He was certainly right about AIDS testing, even though initially the AIDS advocacy community resisted testing for fear of stigmatizing people; eventually, people came around to Richard's side.

Likewise, Richard was most famously right about the Balkans. The Dayton peace accord couldn't have been achieved without Richard's combination of intellectual brilliance, strategic and tactical mastery, and indefatigability, and countless lives were saved as a consequence. That was diplomacy at its finest.

And he was right about Tibet, China and the need to empower women, among many other topics. Many people perhaps didn't realize what a tireless advocate he was of educating girls and bringing women out of the margins of society into the mainstream. Some of that was the influence of his wife, Kati Marton, who for a time was chair of the International Women's Health Coalition, but much was also Richard's own idealism – a huge part of his soul, which people didn't always perceive through his gruff exterior.

Richard succeeded as a diplomat, as a banker, as a journalist (he wrote excellent columns for The Washington Post during the Bush administration) and as a mentor for so many younger people. He particularly liked

journalists, and some of that was no doubt a desire to be quoted— but he also shared the journalistic sensibility, the desire to go out and kick tires and talk to people directly rather than just read briefings. Even in his latest Af-Pak job, he managed to go and talk to real people, whereas many diplomats remained prisoners of our embassies.

Af-Pak was his toughest mission ever, and he assembled a fabulous team. As far as I could tell he had all the right instincts, and he certainly believed deeply in promoting economic development as well as just military operations. But he worked his tail off, and I wonder if the stress of the Af-Pak job, and his constant travel and jet-lag, wasn't one of the underlying reasons for his final heart problem.

Richard also cared deeply about his family and was immensely proud of Kati – a superb author – and his children. He would brag about his kids to me, swelling with pride. And he cared about his huge circle of friends on many continents – and now all of us feel a certain emptiness. The news reports say that his aorta gave out, but don't believe that. His heart couldn't possibly have failed him. This was a man, larger than life, with brain and energy and vast ability, yes, but above all this was a man of heart. And we all feel the loss of that powerful heart, and send our deepest condolences to Kati, his children, and the extended family.

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1.

[Amilcar Tavares](#)

Aveiro, Portugal

December 13th, 2010

10:27 pm

Big loss for all of us. We will miss him.

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[2.](#)

Adam

San Anselmo

December 13th, 2010

10:27 pm

I dont think people value citizens like him enough, he repeatedly gave up more money then imaginable to try and further positive movement for peace and the interests of the USA.

A real hero and I respect him greatly.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 92 Readers

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[3.](#)

The Reasonable Voice

Charlottesville, Va

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

In a time when political parties are warring with each other here at home, when Washington's inner power circle is less popular with its own people than ever, when China is balking and North Korea is threatening and all the world seems to be in potential financial free fall, with two wars raging on foreign shores, the foreign service of diplomacy has lost a "Raging Bull" of communication, the fighter for peace chosen by Presidents Clinton and Obama, to be their olive branch in time of war.

In a time when trust and treaties are diminished by suspicion and isolating nationalism, when walls of self-interest replace fading borders, America was fortunate for "The Bulldozer" who verbally crashed through indifference, ignorance and division to form international alliances respectful of national interests. Though speaking softly was not really his style, his forceful negotiations revealed a deep abiding regard for every side's point of view.

And so we must now carry on without a communication giant for peaceful coexistence and tireless unity of humanity. All Governments and their people need recall the giving life of Richard Holbrooke and give thanks that when humanity needed to interject peace into hearts full of war, Richard Holbrooke was humanity's spokesman for peace. .

- Marcello Rollando

www.thereasonablevoice.com

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[4.](#)

jsc

nyc metro

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

A fitting and heartfelt tribute to a supremely talented diplomat.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 53 Readers

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[5.](#)

P.Scott Cummins

Seattle

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

I would only add to Nick's fitting tribute that Ambassador Holbrooke was a "Lion of Peace" - who knew how to lead, and kept us safe. Our nation has lost one of its best.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 84 Readers

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[6.](#)

[Ratimo Aduke](#)

Boise

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

Richard Holbrooke was the essence of true American diplomacy. America will miss a man of skill and character. America could have used him right about now

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[7.](#)

[KC](#)

Chicago

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

Mr. Kristoff, I knew you would immediately write something about Mr. Holbrooke. Thank you. I was saddened to hear of his health issues the past couple of days. I have admired his work and his tenacity to advance his ideas, especially his recent work in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We lost one of the good ones too early. My condolences to his family and friends.

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[8.](#)

[4Heavenssake](#)

Westchestuh

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

Very appropriate Nick. I wonder if there's anyone anywhere who can replace him. You up for the job? Consider it please.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 25 Readers

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[9.](#)

Donald

New York

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

Okay, I know, speak no ill of the newly departed, but unfortunately with public figures of this sort it means that American foreign policy gets yet another coat of whitewash. But I'm amazed you mention East Timor in this context. I can think of about 100,000-200,000 good reasons why you shouldn't.

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[10.](#)

[jean fasano](#)

mendham, nj

December 13th, 2010

10:28 pm

A most beautiful eulogy. Thank you, Mr. Kristof, I have deep admiration for you.

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[11.](#)

Char

Bryn Mawr

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

Thank you for this wonderful commentary. Ambassador Holbrooke's loss will be felt by all Americans.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 23 Readers

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[12.](#)

[Shahab mohd Altaf](#)

INDIA

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

THE PEACEMAKER

The air is abuzz, Life is a song

Preach no evil, do no wrong

Live For the moment

As the world is in a ferment

Ring in the new, ring out the old

As love is in the air, brave the cold

There is a season of war, a season of peace

Let's not live by the gun and die like fleece

We are our own peacemakers

If we go by the book and not just be book-keepers

who can tell us, what peace is?

Intangible though, priceless gift of Time and chance it is

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 15 Readers

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[13.](#)

Dasha

Dayton, OH

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

As soon as I read this unfortunate news, I immediately looked for a comment from you, certain that you would have known Mr. Holbrooke well. Thank you for thinking of your readers and putting down your initial thoughts so eloquently.

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[14.](#)

[ray gibbs](#)

Chevy Chase, MD.

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

Poet's peace and rest dear faithful servant our country, our world.

Well done Mr. Kristof.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 21 Readers

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[15.](#)

[M Downing](#)

Brooklyn

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

Thank you for this, Mr. Kristof. The world has lost a true force for good.

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[16.](#)

Leigh

San Mateo, CA

December 13th, 2010

11:32 pm

Mr. Holbrooke was an American to be very proud of . His grasp of the historical arc and issues framing current conflicts was staggeringly great - as was his ability to communicate. It's hard to imagine that there is anyone out there who can replace him - it is our nation's loss.

Thank you for giving this special attention.

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[17.](#)

[Nathan Clark](#)

San Diego

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

He was my freshman roommate at Brown University in 1958 and had, by that time, already acquired many of the skills he used so well in his 40 year career as a State Department diplomat. R.I.P., Richard Holbrooke.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 52 Readers

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[18.](#)

R. Ahmed

Chicago

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

I was really praying that he would make it. If there was one person this country needed the most at this time in history it was Mr. Holbrooke. He was tireless champion of american values and cared deeply about the countries he was trying to help rebuild. He was a total package not just a diplomat. I have been privy to some of the people who work under him and they all admired him greatly and all the cooperation achieved with Pakistan is through his efforts because he mastered the subject and he understood Pakistani concerns and dealt with them accordingly he didn't gloss over them as usually the case with our diplomats who are there for short duration. He was the brain behind the multi disciplinary approaching to solving Af Pak problems. It is so sad very few people knew the depth of his commitment and his mastery of his craft.

I am sure Pakistan and Afghanistan has lost a great champion and may his soul be blessed. I am not in his profession but I knew what he was doing and no other man or woman is capable of doing that in this country at this time.

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[19.](#)

Lane Willey

Sonora, California

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

Thank you for the wonderful eulogy. I have followed Mr. Holbrooke's work since I lived in Alexandria, Virginia several decades ago. He will be missed as there are few people who can be as comfortable and successful in whatever role they have been asked to do, especially when it comes to the mid-east. More people like him are needed and are hard to find.

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20.

Ed

Los Angeles

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

It's men and women like Holbrooke who answer to the demands of their conscience that move the nation and the world in a better direction. One Holbrooke is worth many senators and representatives, and possibly a few presidents as well. Pity his aorta could not have cut all of us some slack -- we still needed him. RIP

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21.

[Julemry](#)

Boston, MA

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

Whenever I read his name in an article, I would think, "Oh, that'll get fixed." my confidence in Holbrooke's abilities was immense. Where is the next Richard Holbrooke coming from? We will miss him so much. Deepest sympathies to his family.

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22.

Jacob Sommer

Boston

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

Richard Holbrooke was a dedicated public servant in the best sense of the term. He will be missed. Should anybody sneer at public service or government service, something which seems to be fashionable in some circles, hold up Holbrooke as an example and ask them if the world was better for his work.

Mr. Kristof: my condolences to Mr. Holbrooke's family and friends, all of you.

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23.

ellen

pa.

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

The news came like a blow to the chest today, news of Holbrooke's passing. There is never a good time to lose such a gifted statesman, but surely Richard Holbrooke died too young, without a doubt too suddenly. Many people here and abroad do not know who Holbrooke was, but the man was a giant. I have followed his career in the news for years, since living next door in Italy during the years of his stellar, heroic work in the killing fields of Yugoslavia. He walks with the gods now, and surely they have welcomed him with rapture. Requiescat in pace.

[Recommend](#) Recommended by 33 Readers

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24.

[B Ray](#)

New York

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

We lost a great american today and more importantly, a true global leader and force for peace that will be hard to replace. Hopefully some good will come out of his premature passing and inspire those he worked with to finally make the hard choices he worked his life for to ensure a better future for so many millions of people.

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25.

jacko23

cambridge

December 13th, 2010

11:33 pm

While I never knew him I considered Richard Holbrooke a friend, a typical smart New Yorker who loved his country.

He should get the Congressional Medal of Honor.

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