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POLITICS

Holbrooke

Why I mourn.

Christiane Amanpour December 20, 2010 | 12:00 am 4 comments | More  



What can you say about a problem like Richard Holbrooke? You either loved him or hated him or both. Myself, I loved him. Most of the press did. There is no embarrassment in this. He took us seriously and we took him seriously. We knew how much he valued the platform that we gave to him, but we were not fools and he was not a knave: He plainly wanted the platform just as much, or most of all, not for himself but for his mission. Holbrooke was the rare diplomat who understood the need to make his case publicly—that the press was not always an adversary, but was sometimes an effective method for advancing America's goals. This was a delicate

negotiation—who was the user and who the used, and why; but there were times when America's goals seemed so obviously right that our professional relationship with Holbrooke, or at least my own, was nothing to trouble our journalistic conscience. He was a very clever man, but in his work he also never lost sight of the moral dimension. He was not a moralist, not by a long shot; but he was a moral man, and he was genuinely committed to using American persuasion and power to lessen the cruelty in the world.

We understood that when Holbrooke told us stuff, he was often spinning madly—as though the sheer force and quantity of words, said loudly and often enough, would change things on the ground or around the bargaining table. It was our job to get beyond the spin. Bluff, burly, profane, unexpectedly sensitive, and hilariously funny, Holbrooke was the quintessential opposite of the pin-striped organization men and women who often populate government service at home and abroad. He was flamboyant. His diplomatic sophistication came in blazing Technicolor. I saw this most unforgettably in Bosnia, where I learned that a reporter sometimes has to be morally engaged, and where Holbrooke experienced his great triumph.

In Bosnia we were a kind of team, the press and the president's man. Those of us who chronicled the daily outrage of ethnic cleansing—a new genocide, and in Europe—were torn between anger and hope in our feelings about the United States: anger, because the administration in Washington, along with the other Western governments, seemed content for so long just to watch the catastrophe unfold and do nothing to stop it, and hope, because we believed unreservedly that only America could put an end to the slaughter of the innocents. We could not believe our luck when Richard Holbrooke, a trouble-seeking missile, was deployed to the wrenching scene. If anybody could beat the rampaging Serbian dictator who set the sights of his gunners even on small children, Holbrooke could. And he did.

I have heard some people wondering why Richard Holbrooke is being so noisily and universally eulogized. After all, he was never even Secretary of State. As one who witnessed and covered the finest hour of his career, let me try to explain. The story starts in Sarajevo. In 1984, it had been the city of the Winter Olympics. It was a well-known capital of European diversity: Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived there for centuries, intermingled, even intermarried. Throughout the cold war, Yugoslavia was the least Soviet of the Soviet-bloc. But by 1992, with communism overthrown, diversity turned ugly and took up arms, as the extreme assertion of ethnic identity—more specifically, Serbian and Croatian identity—led to war. When, like Croatia, Bosnia sought its own post-communist independence, it brought down upon itself the xenophobic wrath of Serbia, which directed Orthodox Christian Serbs in Bosnia to carve out their own ethnically pure statelet, and to terrorize and even destroy the Muslim population of Bosnia. They set up concentration camps. They made systematic rape into an instrument of war. They besieged and bombarded Sarajevo and other cities for three and a half years.

I remember the blood-spattered snow that first freezing winter of war in Sarajevo; the rosettes made by mortars crashing into streets, sidewalks, playgrounds, hospitals, homes, and marketplaces. I remember the men, women, and children shot by snipers as they walked to work, or ran to school, or

ped in line to collect water. (The Serbs had cut off the water and the electricity.) That winter we



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down trees to drag home for firewood, to stay fed and to keep warm. Little food made it past the siege. The city's old Lion's Cemetery quickly filled up. The graves, hastily dug with small wooden markers, spilled into the soccer fields and empty ground around the Olympic Stadium, where Torvill and Dean had skated to stardom in better, almost unimaginable days. I would lie awake at night wondering what motivated men to put a child's head in the sights of their guns. Weren't they fathers, too? And I wondered bitterly what kind of a world we lived in that could tolerate this for so long.

We journalists were also on the frontlines. We, too, were shelled and sniped at. We lost many friends and colleagues. It was the first time journalists were deliberately targeted, though now this seems a matter of course. We were bloodied in Bosnia, physically, mentally, and morally. I say morally, because from the start of the war none of the great or even small powers, none of the liberal democracies whose societies were founded on the principles of justice, tolerance, and religious equality, showed any interest in intervening to stop it. We heard endlessly that this was just a civil war. "Centuries of ethnic hatred," "Balkan ghosts," "all sides are equally guilty": I can still hear the chilling excuses.

It was in Bosnia that I learned—I do not mean to make my tribute to my friend too personal, but Bosnia, and his role in it, was inseparable from my own education—what it means to really see what you are witnessing and to call it by its right name. When asked why there was not more balance in my reports from Sarajevo, I asked whether balance should mean making a story up, because there was no balance in the story I was covering. Genocide is an imbalanced situation. Should I, in the name of fairness, have drawn a false moral equivalence between victim and aggressor? I could not, and I would not; but I learned that in Sarajevo. It was there that I learned about objectivity—that giving all sides a fair hearing does not mean treating all sides equally, especially in situations of gross humanitarian violence. Treating all sides equally in Bosnia would have made me into an accomplice.

Richard Holbrooke knew this. His gift for listening attentively to all sides was second to none, but he took a side. It was the side of peace and decency—which, in the Balkans in that conflict, meant the side of Bosnia. Even before he became President Clinton's envoy to Bosnia, he had gone to Bosnia as a private citizen to study the problem and to bear witness. He called it genocide long before governments would. In Sarajevo we kept hearing European diplomats lecture the miserable victims of the siege, "Don't think that the cavalry is coming over the hill to save you." But they were wrong. The cavalry did show up, in the person of Richard Holbrooke.

Just as Sarajevo and all of us were plunging into deep despair and exhaustion, the United States finally rallied and down swooped Richard Holbrooke, deployed by President Clinton. For three years Milosevic and his men called the world's bluff, and then Holbrooke came and called theirs. Armed with the full weight of American resolve—there is no greater, or sadder, example of "better late than never" than America's entry into the Bosnian conflict—he began to get things done. It would take more than another year—and 8,000 more killed, Muslim men and boys slaughtered in the tiny Bosnian town of Srebrenica. Soon after the massacre the United States and its allies launched a brief bombing raid on Serbian military targets in Bosnia. Milosevic and his thugs quickly caved. Holbrooke was then tasked by President Clinton to negotiate an end to the war. At Dayton, Ohio he did just that. His reputation as a bulldozer with sharp elbows and a gift for knocking heads served the cause of peace. It has held to this day. Richard died the day before the fifteenth anniversary of the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords.

Two years ago I went back with Holbrooke to Bosnia. In Sarajevo we walked across the bridge where a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip shot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and started an earlier slaughter. Ordinary Sarajevans came up to him. They had not forgotten what he did, and they wanted to shake his hand. Women and men had tears in their eyes as they thanked America for saving them, for restoring honor and humanity to their country, and to our world. They thanked America by thanking Richard Holbrooke.

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