



APPRECIATION

Remembering Ambassador Richard Holbrooke

By MICHAEL ELLIOTT Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2010

When F. Scott Fitzgerald heard of the death of Thomas Wolfe, he sent a message of condolence to Maxwell Perkins, their editor at Scribner. "That great, pulsing, vital frame quiet at last," Fitzgerald wrote. "There is a great hush after him."



U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke at a meeting of the Friends of Democratic Pakistan on Oct. 15, 2010, in Brussels

To countless numbers around the world, that is how things feel with the death of Richard Holbrooke, America's diplomat extraordinary. On Dec. 10, Holbrooke was rushed to hospital in Washington, D.C., with a tear in his aorta, and notwithstanding hours of surgery and constant care, died, age 69, on the evening of Dec. 13.

In every way, Dick Holbrooke was a big man — handsome, broad-shouldered, with a capacious mind and a generous heart. He lived a public life almost from the moment he graduated from Brown in 1962. Within months, he was in Vietnam, and soon became one of a remarkable band of young diplomats in the Saigon embassy, at one and the same time working to advance American interests in Southeast Asia while learning lessons from mistakes made there — lessons they would put to use later in their careers. Dick never lost a fascination with the region, and it never lost its respect and affection for him. I remember a lunch Dick hosted for Singapore's leader Lee Kuan Yew when he was ambassador to the U.N., and the immense pride he took in Lee's recollection of the way that Dick, when a young Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia (just 35 when he was appointed), had restored American honor in Asia in the dark years after the Vietnam War.

Restoring honor was something of a Holbrooke skill. After four years of cowardly, shifty and above all cruel policymaking in Washington — a miserable fiasco for which officials

working for two Presidents and both political parties were to blame — Holbrooke, then Assistant Secretary of State for European affairs, was tasked with finding a way to end the war in Bosnia, which had led to the deaths of some 200,000. Wheedling, bullying, negotiating, persuading, he took charge of the process that led to the Dayton Accords signed in 1995. In his drive, his boldness, his determination to do anything he could to end the killing, he demonstrated the best of American policy — actually, more than that, the best of the American character. "Try to imagine a European Holbrooke," went the frequently asked question in 1995, as the leaders of the old continent wrung their hands in impotent pusillanimity. "You can't."

To be sure, throughout his career there were always those who said that Dick had a high opinion of his own talents and little time for others less gifted, to which there are two answers. The first is that it ain't bragging if you can do it. Dick could do it, and how. The second is that you should go out, right now, and buy *To End a War*, Holbrooke's account of the Bosnia negotiations. This superb book, a true classic of its kind, is suffused from first page to last with an extraordinary generosity for the contributions of those, well known and obscure, who played their part in bringing Europe's worst conflict since 1945 to an end.

That same big spirit was evident in a part of the Holbrooke résumé that, I would guess, will be little noticed in most obituaries: his dynamic leadership of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria during the years after he left office in 2000. It was evident in the way he brought together U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Senator Jesse Helms, once an inveterate opponent of the U.N., during his years as ambassador in Turtle Bay. It was evident in the days and months he labored long and often thanklessly in what I think he regarded his most difficult task of all, bringing a measure of peace, stability and security to the war-torn lands of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Dick Holbrooke was a friend of mine. Just two days before he fell ill, I saw him — and his devoted wife, the writer Kati Marton — at a dinner where he proposed a toast with generosity, affection, self-deprecation and the sort of comic timing that made you think he had missed his true profession. I liked him enormously. But for all that he did over nearly 50 years of service to his nation, and indeed to all humankind, I admired him much, much more. A great hush, indeed.