

“Who Wrecked the Balkans”: Holbrooke or Milosevic?

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It is usually considered good form to avoid sharp criticism of someone who has just died. But Richard Holbrooke himself set a striking example of the breach of such etiquette. On learning of the death in prison of Slobodan Milosevic, Holbrooke did not hesitate to describe him as a “monster” comparable to Hitler and Stalin.

This was rank ingratitude, considering that Holbrooke owed his greatest career success – the 1995 Dayton Accords that ended the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina – almost entirely to Milosevic. This was made quite clear in his memoir *To End a War* (Random House, 1998).

But Holbrooke’s greatest skill, made possible by media complicity, was to dress up reality in a costume favorable to himself.

The Dayton Peace Accords were presented as a heroic victory for peace extracted by the brilliant Holbrooke from a reluctant Milosevic, who had to be “bombed to the negotiating table” by the United States. In reality, the U.S. government was fully aware that Milosevic was eager for peace in Bosnia to free Serbia from crippling economic sanctions. It was the Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic who wanted to keep the war going, with U.S. military help.

In reality, the U.S. bombed the Serbs in order to get Izetbegovic to the negotiating table. And the agreement reached in the autumn of 1995 was not very different from the agreement reached in March 1992 by the three ethnic groups under European Community auspices, which could have prevented the entire civil war, if it had not been sabotaged by Izetbegovic, who withdrew his agreement with the encouragement of the then U.S. ambassador Warren Zimmermann. In short, far from being the great peacemaker in the Balkans, the United States first encouraged the Muslim side to fight for its goal of a centralized Bosnia, and then sponsored a weakened federated Bosnia – after nearly four years of bloodshed which left the populations bereft and embittered.

The real purpose of all this, as Holbrooke made quite clear in *To End a War*, was to demonstrate that Europeans could not manage their own vital affairs and that the United States remained the “indispensable nation”. His book also made it clear that the Muslim leaders were irritatingly reluctant to end war short of total victory, and that only the readiness of Milosevic to make concessions saved the Dayton talks from failure — allowing Holbrooke to be proclaimed a hero.

The functional role of the Holbrooke’s diplomacy was to prove that diplomacy, as carried out by Europeans, was bound to fail. His victory was a defeat for diplomacy. The spectacle of bombing plus Dayton was designed to show that only the threat or application of U.S.

military might could end conflicts.

Milosevic had hoped that his concessions would lead to peace and reconciliation with the United States. As it happened, his only reward for handing Holbrooke the victory of his career was to have his country bombed by NATO in 1999 in order to wrest from Serbia the province of Kosovo and prepare Milosevic's own fall from office. Holbrooke played a prominent role in this scenario, suddenly posing shoeless in a tent in the summer of 1998 for a photo op seated among armed Albanian secessionists which up to then had been characterized by the State Department as "terrorists", and shortly thereafter announcing to Milosevic that Serbia would be bombed unless he withdrew security forces from the province, in effect giving it to the ex-terrorists transformed by the Holbrooke blessing into freedom fighters.

In his long career from Vietnam to Afghanistan, Holbrooke was active on many fronts. In 1977, after Indonesia invaded East Timor and set about massacring the people of that former Portuguese colony, Holbrooke was dispatched by the United States supposedly to promote "human rights" but in reality to help arm the Suharto dictatorship against the East Timorese. Sometimes the government is armed against rebels, sometimes rebels are armed against the government, but despite appearances of contradiction, what is consistent throughout is the cynical exploitation and exacerbation of tragic local conflicts to extend U.S. imperial power throughout the world.

Holbrooke and Milosevic were born in the same year, 1941. When Milosevic died in 2006, Holbrooke gave a long statement to the BBC without a single syllable of human kindness. "This man wrecked the Balkans," said Holbrooke.

"He was a war criminal who caused four wars, over 300,000 deaths, 2.5million homeless. Sometimes monsters make the biggest impacts on history - Hitler and Stalin - and such is the case with this gentleman."

Holbrooke presented himself as goodness dealing with evil for a worthy cause. When negotiating with Milosevic, "you're conscious of the fact that you're sitting across the table from a monster whose role in history will be terrible and who has caused so many deaths."

Who was the monster? Nobody, including at the Hague tribunal where he died for lack of medical treatment, has ever actually proved that Milosevic was responsible for the tragic deaths in the wars of Yugoslav disintegration. But Holbrooke was never put on trial for all the deaths in Vietnam, East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq and, yes, former Yugoslavia, which resulted at least in part from the U.S. policies he carried out.

From his self-proclaimed moral heights, Holbrooke judged the Serbian leader as an opportunist without political convictions, neither communist nor nationalist, but simply "an opportunist who sought power and wealth for himself."

In reality, there has never been any proof that Milosevic sought or obtained wealth for himself, whereas Holbrooke was, among many other things, a vice chairman of Credit Suisse First Boston, managing director of Lehman Brothers, vice chairman of the private equity firm Perseus LLC, and a member of the board of directors of AIG, the American International Group, at a time when, according to Wikipedia, "the firm engaged in wildly speculative credit default insurance schemes that may cost the taxpayer hundreds of billions to prevent AIG from bringing down the entire financial system."

Milosevic was on trial for years without ever being to present his defense before he died under troubling circumstances. Holbrooke found that outcome perfectly satisfying: "I knew as soon as he reached The Hague that he'd never see daylight again and I think that justice was served in a weird way because he died in his cell, and that was the right thing to do."

There are many other instances of lies and deceptions in Holbrooke's manipulation of Balkan woes, as well as his totally cynical exploitation of the tragedies of Vietnam, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. But still, his importance should not be overstated. Moral monsters do not always make a great impact on history, when they are merely the vain instruments of a bureaucratic military machine running amok.

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