
American National Biography

Holbrooke, Richard

(24 Apr. 1941–13 Dec. 2010)

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Holbrooke, Richard (24 Apr. 1941–13 Dec. 2010), diplomat, magazine editor, and investment banker, was born Richard Charles Albert Holbrooke in New York City, the son of Dan Holbrooke, a doctor, and Trudi Kearn (née Moos), a potter. Holbrooke's Jewish parents immigrated to the United States separately before his birth. His father emigrated in the 1930s from Warsaw, Poland, and changed his last name from Goldbrajch, while Trudi emigrated to the US from Germany, via Argentina. Holbrooke's father died of cancer when Richard was fifteen. Holbrooke attended and graduated from Scarsdale High School in New York in 1958. His first connection to international diplomacy came in his teen years as his best friend in high school was the son of Dean Rusk, a future Secretary of State to John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Holbrooke attended Brown University, from which he graduated in 1962. While in college, Holbrooke was sent to Paris, France, in 1960 to serve as a correspondent for the *New York Herald* during the Four Powers Summit. His assignment was cut short as the summit was canceled due to the downing of a U2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers.

After graduating from Brown, Holbrooke joined the State Department as a Foreign Service Officer and was sent to Vietnam for his first assignment. During his three years serving in Vietnam, Holbrooke worked with other Foreign Service officers who would go on to serve in high positions in the US government, including John Negroponte, George W. Bush's ambassador to Iraq and deputy Secretary of State; Les Aspin, Congressman and Secretary of Defense under Bill Clinton; and Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor for Bill Clinton.

In 1964, Holbrooke married Larrine Sullivan, with whom he had two children. Holbrooke and his wife eventually divorced. In 1966, Holbrooke returned to the United States to serve as Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach's main Vietnam policy advisor. Holbrooke claimed in a 2010 appearance before the House Appropriations Foreign Operations sub-committee that he co-authored a volume of the Pentagon Papers while serving as a Vietnam policy advisor. He was asked to join the American delegation as the youngest member of the negotiating team at the Paris Peace Talks in 1968, which were the start of negotiations with the North Vietnamese government to end the Vietnam War.

After working seven years in the State Department, Holbrooke spent a year as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. In 1970 he became director for the Peace Corps in Morocco. He resigned that position in 1972 to become editor of the upstart magazine *Foreign Policy*, which was more critical of American foreign policy actions than other contemporary publications, such as *Foreign Affairs*. In 1976, Holbrooke left *Foreign Policy* to join Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign as a foreign policy advisor. After Carter's close victory over Gerald Ford in the 1976 presidential election, Holbrooke became the youngest-ever Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

During Holbrooke's tenure as assistant Secretary of State, one of his goals was to normalize US diplomatic relations with China and Vietnam. Holbrooke, though, was kept from a front-line role in negotiations with China, and his efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam were unsuccessful. Complicating Holbrooke's tenure during his service in the Carter administration was his clash with officials representing an "old guard" of policymaking. He was also criticized for being "soft" regarding the use of American power, especially during a time when American military power was under criticism after the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973 and the fall of the South Vietnamese government in 1975. Holbrooke preferred informality in intra-office affairs, which drew the criticism of veteran officials within the State Department. Holbrooke married his second wife, television producer Blythe Babyak, in 1977; that marriage also ended in divorce.

One of Holbrooke's accomplishments during his tenure in the Carter administration was to help coordinate the relief effort of Cambodian refugees during the Khmer Rouge's time in power from 1975-1979 and the Vietnamese invasion in 1979 that led to the fall of the Khmer Rouge government. According to Holbrooke, the objective of American foreign policy in the region was to save the lives of those caught on both sides, and not play politics regarding food aid.

After Carter's loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, Holbrooke embarked on a career on Wall Street, where he became a consultant and managing director of the investment bank Lehman Brothers and vice president of Public Strategies, a consulting firm he co-founded. During his time in the private sector, Holbrooke volunteered for the Carnegie Commission and other foreign policy foundations. He co-authored *Counsel to the President*, published in 1991, which was a bestselling memoir of former Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford, who served as an advisor for several presidents. Holbrooke also served as a foreign policy advisor to the presidential campaigns of Al Gore in 1988 and Bill Clinton in 1992.

Bosnia would serve as Holbrooke's defining foreign policy achievement. He visited Bosnia during its civil war in 1992 as a private citizen in his role as a member of the board of directors at Refugees International. Despite little attention seemingly paid to Bosnia by the outgoing Bush administration and the incoming Clinton administration, Holbrooke pushed for greater American

intervention. He sent a memo to future Secretary of State Warren Christopher and National Security Advisor Anthony Lake arguing that Bosnia and Herzegovina represented a key area of American foreign policy and advocated lifting the arms embargo in place against Bosnian Muslim forces.

After Bill Clinton's victory in the 1992 presidential election, Holbrooke was discussed as a possible ambassador to Japan. However, the position eventually went to former vice president Walter Mondale, with whom Holbrooke served during the Carter administration. Instead, Holbrooke was named ambassador to Germany, a post he served in from 1993 to 1994. In 1994, Holbrooke was named Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, where he handled American foreign policy regarding NATO expansion and the Bosnian War.

In the aftermath of the massacre of Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica in July 1995, Holbrooke was tasked with leading American diplomatic efforts to end the war. His efforts to intervene in Bosnia almost ended prematurely as three members of his negotiating team were killed in an accident involving their armored personnel carrier as they tried to enter Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was under siege by Bosnian Serb forces at the time. Holbrooke's hatred of the Bosnian Serb leaders was deep, as he blamed them for causing the war and the death of his colleagues. This hatred extended to the negotiating table, as Holbrooke refused to shake hands with Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić during peace talks. Holbrooke eventually coaxed the leaders of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia to sign the Dayton Peace Accords at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995, which ended the war.

The year 1995 turned out to be a busy one personally for Holbrooke as he married author and journalist Kati Marton, former wife of television journalist Peter Jennings. Holbrooke left government service shortly after the Dayton Peace Accords were signed to spend more time with Kati, and he became vice chairman for Credit Suisse First Boston. During his time away from government service, Holbrooke served as a special envoy for the Clinton administration in Cyprus in 1997 and Kosovo in 1998–1999. He returned to full-time government service in 1999 after being named ambassador to the United Nations, a post he served in until the end of Clinton's term in January 2001. His largest achievement during his time as UN ambassador was negotiating an agreement that lowered the US debt to the UN for non-payment of dues, which totaled nearly \$900 million in 2000.

Holbrooke once again returned to the private sector in 2001, where he founded and was president of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, a group that mobilized support from multinational corporations in fighting AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. He also served as a director for Human Genome Sciences. During Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign, Holbrooke served as her foreign policy advisor.

Holbrooke's ultimate ambition was to be named Secretary of State. However, the goal was out of reach as Hillary Clinton was named to the post after Barack Obama's election as president. Instead Holbrooke was named special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but personality conflicts contributed to his diminished influence in the Obama administration. He was serving in that post when he died from complications of a torn aorta in Washington, DC.

Richard Holbrooke's greatest triumph was securing peace in Bosnia. However, his legacy as a diplomat and advisor is far reaching. Throughout his public service career, Holbrooke was not shy about taking on tough challenges. While he did not achieve as much success in some of those endeavors as he did with the Bosnian War, such as in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, he considered it a moral duty for the United States to keep the peace and help those most affected by war. While his brash and brusque demeanor put him at odds with government colleagues, Holbrooke will be remembered as an influential figure who took on issues that some considered to be ill-advised, but that he thought were worth fighting for.

Bibliography

Portions of Holbrooke's personal papers are in the possession of author George Packer, who is writing an authorized biography. A small collection of his papers, mainly related to interviews Holbrooke conducted with Clark Gifford, are located at the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library in Independence, Missouri. The most comprehensive account of Holbrooke's life can be found in the part memoir, part biography *The Unquiet American*, Derek Chollet and Samantha Power, eds. (2012). Holbrooke also wrote a widely praised account, *To End a War* (1999), that traced his efforts to end the Bosnian War. Holbrooke's son, David, directed a documentary, *The Diplomat* (2015), that chronicles his father's career, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. An obituary appeared in *The New York Times* on 13 Dec. 2010.

See also

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