Richard Holbrooke: Long-time operative for US imperialism

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There is no reason to pull any punches in regard to Richard C. Holbrooke, the long-time US diplomat who died Monday night in Washington. He was a bully and a liar for the most rapacious and militaristic power in the world, a man steeped in the commission and cover-up of bloody crimes. He devoted his life to defending the worldwide interests of American corporations and banks, and became personally wealthy as a consequence.

The obligatory tributes pouring in from the US political establishment—from President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former President Bill Clinton, the editorial page of the *Washington Post*, and politicians and pundits galore—amount to a self-indictment of the character and "morality" of these gentlemen and ladies. As for the bouquets from foreign leaders, from British Prime Minister David Cameron to Afghan President Hamid Karzai, it is a mafia tradition to send flowers to the funeral.

As far as the Washington press corps was concerned, Holbrooke's was a death in the family. *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen blogged about a recent encounter with this "extraordinary man," when Holbrooke visited Cohen's beachfront home last summer. Judy Woodruff of PBS and Al Hunt of Bloomberg News visited the dying envoy in the hospital.

The gushing by the press reveals an important feature of American political life—the incestuous relations between Wall Street, the Washington power structure and leading circles in the media, cemented by vast sums of money. Holbrooke personified this relationship, shuttling back and forth between investment banking and the State Department, squiring Diane Sawyer about Manhattan and then marrying Kati Marton, the ex-wife of ABC anchorman Peter Jennings.

While the obituaries and tributes gave first place to Holbrooke's role in the Balkan crisis of the 1990s, where he brokered the Dayton Accord that ended open warfare in Bosnia, this was only one of the many episodes in a career that spanned nearly 50 years, from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

A junior foreign service officer in the early stages of the Vietnam War, Holbrooke rose rapidly to leading positions, and served in every Democratic administration since John F. Kennedy's. He had close connections with the Republican foreign policy establishment as well, including Henry Kissinger and Holbrooke's colleague from Vietnam, John Negroponte, US ambassador to the United Nations under George W. Bush.

Born in 1941 of Jewish parents who emigrated from Germany and Poland in the 1930s, Holbrooke was a high school classmate and friend of David Rusk, the son of Kennedy's hawkish secretary of state, Dean Rusk. This connection led him to join the Foreign Service after graduating from Brown University. He took a year of foreign language instruction, and went to Vietnam.

Mass murder in Vietnam

Holbrooke was stationed in the Mekong Delta as a 22-year-old civil affairs officer in charge of an entire province with 600,000 people. He was one of the cabal of young, energetic and ruthless operatives, dubbed "The Best and the Brightest" by author David Halberstam, who spearheaded the American effort in Vietnam.

His initial position was as a field officer for the US Agency for International Development, which placed US officials as overlords in Vietnamese villages and towns, supervising the operations of the stooge government of South Vietnam. The US had established this puppet regime in an effort to thwart the Vietnamese nationalist movement that defeated the French colonialists in the first Vietnam War, between 1946 and 1954.

By 1959, local nationalist guerrillas in the south had launched a guerrilla war, seeking to overthrow the US-backed dictatorship of Ngo Dinh Diem and reunify the country under the leadership of the Viet Minh, which ruled the northern half of the country. As the fighting escalated, US troops were deployed, initially as "advisers."

Holbrooke was an operative in the protracted effort to break the connection between the insurgents and the peasantry, which included, in a long series of failures, locating US officials in villages (the Pacification Program), removing the population from their villages to larger aggregations ("strategic hamlets"), and the systematic assassination of suspected NLF cadres (the Phoenix Program).

More than 20,000 Vietnamese were tortured and executed in the last-named campaign, one of the great unpunished war crimes of the twentieth century. Those educated in this school for mass murder included a who's who of later top US diplomats, most of them in Democratic administrations. These included Holbrooke, Negroponte, future Clinton National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, future Clinton Defense Secretary Les Aspin, Frank Wisner, a future top State Department official in both the Carter and Clinton administrations, and Peter Tarnoff, Clinton's deputy secretary of state.

Holbrooke moved up quickly from field officer to become a staff assistant at the US Embassy in Saigon, and then in 1966 joined the White

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House staff of President Lyndon Johnson, working for Robert Komer, known as “Blowtorch Bob” for his role as chief of the Phoenix Program. Later he moved to the State Department, working as part of the team that drafted the Pentagon Papers, the secret history of US-Vietnam relations leaked to the press by Daniel Ellsberg.

After Republican Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968, Holbrooke served briefly on the State Department delegation at the Paris Peace Talks, then as head of Peace Corps operations in Morocco, before beginning his second career in investment banking. He worked for Credit Suisse, eventually becoming a vice president. From then on, he alternated between the State Department and Wall Street, depending on the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party.

Holbrooke and Pol Pot

The press obituaries are silent about the next stage in Holbrooke’s diplomatic career, his four years in the Carter administration, from 1977 to 1981, as assistant secretary of state for Asian affairs. In that capacity, he was the point man for US foreign policy in a region in turmoil after the shattering defeat of the United States in Vietnam, which had weakened pro-US dictatorships in South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Indonesia.

In each of these countries, the Carter administration pursued a policy of propping up the regimes while urging concessions to popular aspirations in order to fend off further revolts. In pursuit of this policy, Washington cultivated “dissident” elements within the local ruling elite, like Benigno Aquino in the Philippines and Kim Dae Jung in South Korea, in some cases intervening to block their execution. The fruits of this policy included agreements negotiated by Holbrooke to extend US basing rights in the Philippines for another five years and to continue US aid to the Indonesian military despite ongoing atrocities in East Timor.

Continuing the rapprochement with the Beijing Stalinist regime begun by Nixon and Kissinger, Carter withdrew official recognition of the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan in 1978 and gave full recognition to the Peoples Republic of China in 1979. This culminated in the tacit US support for China in its reactionary war of aggression launched against Vietnam towards the end of 1979.

Holbrooke played a key role in one of the foulest policies of Washington during this period—its support to the genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia, which had murdered more than one million people, some 20 percent of the country’s population. The US backing came into the open after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge in December 1978. Author Elizabeth Becker described the US policy in her 1986 book, *When the War Was Over, Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution*:

“First and foremost the Vietnamese occupation had to be punished. Propelled by the United States and China, the most severe international sanctions to date were levied against Vietnam for its occupation of Cambodia. By the summer of 1979, the Carter administration had begun a successful campaign to convince other nations as well as charities, international aid organizations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to end aid to Vietnam as well as Cambodia. Holbrooke and his deputy Robert B. Oakley led the fight” (op. cit., p. 446).

The press account and official statements praising Holbrooke for supposedly “saving lives” in the Balkans make no mention of his role in defending the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

Out of office again in 1981, Holbrooke returned to Wall Street, and with great success. He formed an investment advisory firm, Public Strategies, and ultimately sold it for millions to Lehman Brothers, where he became a managing director.

He took time out from these labors to intervene in at least one diplomatic dispute, when an article appeared in *Foreign Policy* magazine that mildly criticized the record of his crony, John Negroponte, who was ambassador to Honduras during the period when the Reagan administration used the country as the staging area for its “contra” terrorist war against Nicaragua. Holbrooke wrote an angry letter to the magazine, defending Negroponte as “a career foreign service officer who has served with great distinction under every Secretary of State since Dean Rusk.”

The Yugoslav civil war

The bulk of the official praise for Holbrooke stems from his role in the Balkans in the 1990s. After the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, Holbrooke was disappointed in his hopes for high office, offered only the position of US ambassador to the reunified Germany. In 1994, he returned to Washington as assistant secretary of state for European affairs, and focused his efforts on the civil war that erupted in the former Yugoslavia.

The war itself was the byproduct of imperialist intrigues in the Balkans. Germany, flexing its muscles after reunification, recognized both Slovenia and Croatia as soon as they broke away from the federal republic. Both countries were formerly under German domination in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Croatia had been an allied vassal state of the Nazis during World War II.

The US, after initially backing the federal government in Belgrade, sought influence in the next republic to secede, Bosnia. The Bosnian Serbs, transformed overnight into a minority in the new country, took up arms and a series of atrocities followed, which became known as “ethnic cleansing,” as Serb, Muslim and Croat nationalist forces vied for control of contested territory.

The Clinton administration intervened in 1995 with bombing attacks on the Serbs and forced the leaders of Croatia, Bosnia and the remnant of the federal government, now reduced to the rump of Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro, to attend talks at an air force base outside of Dayton, Ohio. Holbrooke headed the US delegation and bullied Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic into a “peace” agreement. The Dayton Accords effectively partitioned Bosnia into two parts, one Muslim-Croat, the other Serb, with the Serbs reduced to minority status and barred from unifying with neighboring Serbia.

In the course of those talks, Holbrooke freely invoked the threat of renewed US military action as well as economic sanctions against Serbia.

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He later told an interviewer, “The Balkans is an area of very tough, tribal mountain people. And you have to deal with it in an appropriate manner.”

What Holbrooke considered “appropriate” was laid out in his subsequent book celebrating his own achievements at Dayton, in which he boasted about the US backing for the 1995 Croatian offensive in the Krajina, a Serb-populated region of the country. This led to the largest single episode of “ethnic cleansing” of the Yugoslav civil war, with more than 250,000 Serbs driven from their homes and across the border into Bosnia or Serbia.

The US government publicly pretended to oppose the offensive, but Holbrooke and the US ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, conveyed a different sentiment when they met with Croatian President Tudjman. Holbrooke wrote: “Tudjman wanted clarification of the American position. He bluntly asked for my personal views. I indicated my general support for the offensive, but delayed a more detailed exchange for a second meeting so that I could discuss it with my colleagues and Washington.

“Galbraith and I met with Tudjman alone again on September 17… I told Tudjman the offensive had great value to the negotiations. It would be much easier to retain at the table what had been won on the battlefield than to get the Serbs to give up territory they had controlled for several years.”

Later, when another US official protested that this violated US policy, Holbrooke’s top aide, Robert Frasure, passed a note to Holbrooke. It read: “Dick: We ‘hired’ these people to be our junkyard dogs because we were desperate. We need to try to ‘control’ them. But this is no time to get squeamish about things.” Holbrooke proudly reproduced the note in his memoir as a good example of American toughness.

While the Dayton Accords were counted a relative success for American diplomacy, Holbrooke’s reputation nonetheless came under a more or less public cloud, and he was labeled a bully and a braggart. He also failed to achieve his personal goal of being named secretary of state to succeed Warren Christopher in 1997, with Clinton picking Madeleine Albright instead.

Holbrooke went back to Wall Street, but returned to reprise his role as a US enforcer in the Balkans, traveling to Belgrade as a special presidential envoy to deliver the final US warning to Slobodan Milosevic in March 1999, before the Clinton administration began its two-month bombing campaign against Serbia, which ultimately compelled the Serbian military to withdraw from Kosovo.

Clinton then named Holbrooke to succeed Bill Richardson as US ambassador to the United Nations, a cabinet position that was the highest office he was to attain. In that capacity, one of his first actions was to engineer an extension of the US-backed economic sanctions against Iraq, which in the course of the 12 years between the end of the first Gulf War (1991) and the invasion ordered by George W. Bush (2003) caused the death of a half million Iraqi children.

From Wall Street to Obama

Following the 2000 election, Holbrooke again returned to Wall Street, where, among other lucrative positions, he became a director of the huge financial and insurance conglomerate AIG. In the course of a decade AIG became the largest single issuer of derivatives and played a colossal role in the financial crash of 2008. Holbrooke also reportedly received below-market mortgage loans from Countrywide Financial, the leading mortgage lender, designated as a “friend of Angelo” by the company’s chairman, Angelo Mozilo.

Holbrooke left the board of AIG in July 2008, two months before the collapse, to prepare his return to government with the incoming Democratic administration. Having signed on as the top foreign policy adviser to the campaign of Hillary Clinton, expecting to be named her secretary of state, Holbrooke had bet on the wrong horse. But when Barack Obama picked Clinton to head the State Department, she offered him the lesser post of special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There was some internal resistance to this selection, with Vice President Joseph Biden telling Obama, “He’s the most egotistical bastard I’ve ever met,” according the Bob Woodward book *Obama’s War*s. Afghan President Karzai clashed with him repeatedly and at one point refused to meet with him. By most accounts, Holbrooke looked on the US enterprise with a jaundiced eye, openly comparing it to Vietnam in an interview with George Packer of the *New Yorker*.

He was still, however, quite able to perform one of the most essential functions of a US diplomat—barefaced, shameless lying. Thus, after multiple press and eyewitness accounts of US cross-border raids into the tribal territories of Pakistan, he declared publicly in July, “People think that the US has troops in Pakistan. Well, we don’t.”

Holbrooke died an unrepentant advocate of American imperialism. At a conference in Washington September 29, 2010, sponsored by the Office of the Historian of the State Department, Holbrooke defended the war in Vietnam with his characteristic combination of arrogance and self-righteousness. “Our cause—there was nothing wrong with our cause in Vietnam,” he said, in response to a direct question. “But sometimes, even the world’s greatest power can’t achieve its goal. And on that basis, I think you have to evaluate policy.”

The fulsome praise for this “statesman” from Obama and from Bill and Hillary demonstrates the reactionary role of the Democratic Party. Obama was elected in large measure because he successfully appealed to the antiwar sentiments of the American people, particularly in relation to the war in Iraq. But the Democratic Party, like the Republican, is an instrument of the US financial aristocracy, and thus unshakably committed to the defense of American imperialism.

There are dozens of articles on the *World Socialist Web Site* which reference Holbrooke’s role in the Clinton and Obama administrations, as well as the Wall Street financial crisis. To cite only a few:

April 15, 1999: The US and ethnic cleansing—the case of Croatia

September 28, 1999: Clinton administration blocks easing of sanctions against Iraq

March 24, 2005: Top insurance company mired in allegations of accounting fraud

January 24, 2009: Obama’s new foreign policy team prepares escalated bloodletting in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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