

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks at a Memorial Service for Former United States Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard C. Holbrooke
January 14, 2011

To Kati, Anthony, David, and Elizabeth, to all the friends and admirers of Richard, we come together to celebrate an extraordinary life.

In 1999, at the height of the crisis in Kosovo, Richard gave an interview in which he addressed the question of why the United States was engaged in bringing peace to that war-torn corner of the world. Why bother? His answer was simple: "Because we could make a difference." Because we could make a difference.

That is the story of American leadership in the world. And that is also the story of Richard Holbrooke. He made a difference.

In 1962, when he was just 22 years old, he set out for Vietnam as a Foreign Service officer. He could not have known the twists and turns that lay ahead of him and his country in that war or the road that he would travel over nearly five decades of service to his country. But it's no coincidence that his life story so closely paralleled the major events of his times.

The list of places he served and the things he did reads as a chronicle of American foreign policy: speaking truth to power from the Mekong Delta to the Paris peace talks, paving the way to our normalization of relations with China, serving as Ambassador in a newly unified Germany, bringing peace to the Balkans, strengthening our relationship with the United Nations, and working to advance peace and progress in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Richard came of an age looking up to the men who had helped shape the postwar world: Dean Acheson, Averell Harriman, Clark Clifford, Dean Rusk. And in many ways, he was the leading light of a generation of American diplomats who came of age in Vietnam.

It was a generation that came to know both the tragic limits and awesome possibilities of American power: born at a time of triumph in World War II steeped in the painful lessons of Southeast Asia, participants in the twilight struggle that led ultimately to freedom's triumph during the cold war.

After the shadow of communism lifted along with the Iron Curtain, Richard understood that America could not retreat from the world. He recognized that our prosperity is tied to that of others, that our security is endangered by instability abroad, and most importantly, that our moral leadership is at stake when innocent men, women, and children are slaughtered through senseless violence, whether it's in Srebrenica or Islamabad.

Richard possessed a hard-headed, clear-eyed realism about how the world works. He was not naive, but he also believed that America has a unique responsibility in the course of human events. He understood American power, in all its complexity, and believed that when it is applied with purpose and principle, it can tip the scales of history. And that coupling of realism and idealism, which has always represented what is best in American foreign policy, that was at the heart of his work in Bosnia, where he negotiated and cajoled and threatened all at once, until peace was the only outcome possible.

And by the time I came to know Richard, his place in history was assured. His options in the private sector—where so many of his peers had settled—were too numerous to mention.

But from my first conversation with him in Chicago, in my transition office—a conversation in which he teared up when he began to talk about the importance of restoring America's place in the world—it was clear that Richard was not comfortable on the sidelines. He belonged in the arena.

To Kati and to his wonderful family, I am personally grateful. I know that every hour he spent with me in the Situation Room or spent traveling to Southeast Asia, South Asia, was time spent away from you. You shared in his sacrifice, and that the sacrifice is made greater because he loved you so. He served his country until his final moments.

Those who take the measure of his last mission will see his foresight. He understood that the futures of Afghanistan and Pakistan are tied together. In Afghanistan, he cultivated areas like agriculture and governance to seed stability. With Pakistan, he created new habits of cooperation to overcome decades of mistrust. And globally, he helped align the approaches of 49 nations.

Were he here with us, I know Richard would credit the extraordinary team that he assembled. And today I'd like to make a personal appeal to the SRAP team, particularly the young people: Stay in public service; serve your country; seek the peace that your mentor so ardently sought. I also know that Richard would want us to lift up the next generation of public servants, particularly our diplomats who so rarely receive credit. And so I'm proud to announce the creation of an annual Richard C. Holbrooke Award to honor excellence in American diplomacy.

As we look to the next generation, it is fitting, as David mentioned, that this memorial take place at the Kennedy Center, named for the President who called Richard's generation to serve. It's also fitting that this memorial takes place at a time when our Nation has recently received a tragic reminder that we must never take our public servants for granted and must always honor their work.

America is not defined by ethnicity. It's not defined by geography. We are a nation born of an idea, a commitment to human freedom.

And over the last five decades, there have been countless times when people made the mistake of counting on America's decline or disengagement. Time and again, those voices have been proven wrong, but only because of the service and sacrifice of exceptional men and women, those who answered the call of history and made America's cause their own.

Like the country he served, Richard contained complexities. So full of life, he was a man both confident in himself and curious about others, alive to the world around him with a character that is captured in the words of a Mathew Arnold poem that he admired:

But often, in the din of strife,
there rises an unspeakable desire
after the knowledge of the buried life;
[the] thirst to spend our fire and restless force
in tracking our true, original course;
a longing to inquire
into the mystery of this heart which beats
so wild, so deep in us—to know
whence our lives come and where they go.

Richard is gone now, but we carry with us his thirst to know, to grasp, and to heal the world around him. His legacy is seen in the children of Bosnia who lived to raise families of their own, in a Europe that is peaceful and united and free, in young boys and girls from the tribal regions of Pakistan to whom he pledged our country's friendship, and in the role that America continues to play as a light to all who aspire to live in freedom and in dignity.

Five decades after a young President called him to serve, we can confidently say that Richard bore the burden to assure the survival and success of liberty. He made a difference. Let us now carry that work forward in our time.

May God bless the memory of Richard Holbrooke, and may God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 3:33 p.m. at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. In his remarks, he referred to Kati Marton, wife, Anthony and David Holbrooke, sons, and Elizabeth Jennings, stepdaughter, of former Ambassador Holbrooke.

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