

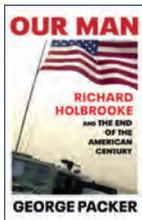
Reviews

Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century

George Packer

Jonathon Cape (2019)

Reviewed by Ric Smith



Just as the American diplomat Richard Holbrooke was often described as a *force of nature*, so George Packer's biography of him is a *force of literature*, at least of the biographical genre—engrossing in its content, brilliant in its composition.

What differentiates Packer's work from typical accounts of the life and times of a major public figure is his focus on Holbrooke's personality and his character. His judgement is forthright: 'Our man' aspired to be the Secretary of

State for a Democrat President but in the end, says Packer, his 'dream job' was denied him because of 'defects of character'.¹ But it didn't happen quickly: the story of Holbrooke's career and how his defects mixed with his successes spreads over 50 years. In Packer's telling, it's a tragedy, but never less than entertaining.

Holbrooke's restlessness and precociousness were evident in his first overseas assignment as a junior State Department adviser in Vietnam in the 1960s. He was quick to judge that victory in Indochina could not be achieved by military force alone and that negotiation (*a political solution*) offered the only way out. He didn't oppose the war. He just thought it was being fought the wrong way, with too little regard for its political content. He liked military power but understood its limits; and his judgements in this area informed his thinking for the rest of his career, not least in his final role as Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP).

In Packer's account, two particular threads—Holbrooke's character and the influence of Vietnam—eventually came together to preclude the kind of relationship he aspired to with the last President for whom he worked, Barack Obama. He got off to a bad enough

1 George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (London: Jonathon Cape, 2019), 7.

start with the President-elect when, in their first meeting, he asked to be referred to as 'Richard' rather than 'Dick' because that's what his wife preferred. But it got worse: Obama felt he was being patronised, and was particularly sensitive to Holbrooke's repeated implication that Afghanistan could be for him what Vietnam had been for Johnson some 50 years earlier. Holbrooke's reputation and the triumph of his earlier work in the Balkans and the UN notwithstanding, Obama would have sacked Holbrooke two years later had it not been for the support he had from Hillary Clinton.

The background against which Packer paints this colourful portrait is clear from his bold subtitle: '*and the end of the American century*'. America, the nation, and Holbrooke, the man, are seen as moving through the post-Second World War era in parallel. 'The best about us was inseparable from the worst ... Our confidence and energy, our excesses and blindness, were not different from Holbrooke's.'²

Packer's judgements about the wide canvas of the American century and the decline of American influence in the 1990s are sweeping. 'There was no Clinton doctrine other than the Pres-

ident's boundless confidence in globalisation...Holbrooke wanted more ... He was that rare American in the tree-tops who gave a shit about the dark places... If we didn't act no one else would...'³ And so, quoting Holbrooke's complaint that 'we are too complacent and indifferent', Packer concludes that 'the main lesson of the nineties—where there's an American will there's a way—depended on accidents of history and geography'⁴ ...Pax Americana began to decay at it's very height ... 1998. We were flabby, smug and self-absorbed. Did any country ever combine so much power with so little responsibility?'⁵

These are Packer's views, but they align with those of his subject. Holbrooke believed, Packer says, that 'a soft Democrat was politically doomed',⁶ and Holbrooke liked Hillary Clinton better than Bill because she was tougher.

It would be tempting to pause to argue that there was more to America's relative decline than the failings of the Clinton Administration, but the fast moving narrative brooks no interruption. And anyway, the deeply personal and pungent *bon mots* with which Packer punctuates his tale are distraction enough. 'I told you,' he insists, 'that foreign policy makes no sense.'⁷ And he

2 Ibid., 9.

3 Ibid., 398.

4 Ibid., 429.

5 Ibid., 399–400.

6 Ibid., 429.

7 Ibid., 269.

asserts, 'Governments are composed of human beings, not policy positions'⁸ and 'In government, foolish certainty usually beats fragile wisdom.'⁹

Packer had studied Holbrooke for 40 years, without really liking this 'monstrous egotist'.¹⁰ Courtesy of Holbrooke's third wife and widow, Kati Marton, Parker had unfettered access to Holbrooke's papers, including some of a kind most wives would normally have withheld. It's this familiarity with the subject and Packer's raw and distinctive style that lifts this biography way above the ordinary.

'I can't get his voice out of my head,' Packer says at the outset.¹¹ Along the way, he refers to 'the relentless undertow of that voice', and in the end says 'I've gone on longer than I meant. There's too much to say, and I still can't get his voice out of my head'.¹²

Richard Holbrooke's personal qualities are indeed a rich lode to quarry. His intelligence and self-confidence, his brashness and energy, his creative flair, his unrelenting ambition and competitiveness, his genuine humaneness, his networking skills, his questing for loyalty—these were the ingredients that earned him many sobriquets, 'bulldozer' not the least of them. But the effect was tarnished by other qualities:

his insecurity (described by his closest friend as 'vulnerability' and 'fragility'), his narcissism, his rudeness ('no one escaped his inattention'), and his inability to see himself as others saw him ('he couldn't laugh at himself because he didn't know himself'). And while there are times when diplomacy demands a certain level of duplicity, Packer recalls enough of it in Holbrooke's personal life as well as his professional career to suggest he made an art form of it.

Packer's account embraces all this and more: Holbrooke's carelessness in dress and habits (the sweaty feet, the socks) as well as manners, his financial overreach as he endeavoured to match it in the world of celebrities and power that he liked to inhabit, his desperate pursuit of publicity, his competitive and often destructive personal relationships. Numerous affairs were fitted in among (and in some cases in parallel with) his three marriages, including one in the 1980s when for six years he and Diane Sawyer were the 'Manhattan power couple in a decade of televised glitz' (before she dumped him).¹³

Holbrooke's relationship with Tony Lake is a story within this story. We meet Lake as Holbrooke's State Department contemporary and his much admired and envied best friend, even as he as-

8 Ibid., 107.

9 Ibid., 121.

10 Ibid., 6.

11 Ibid., 3.

12 Ibid., 556.

13 Ibid., 214.

pires to seduce his wife, but overtime he becomes a fierce rival for preferment in Democrat administrations as Lake presses on to become National Security Adviser and Holbrooke is overlooked. The tension between them surfaces again and again as they work together on some of the great crises of their times.

Holbrooke's success in bringing about a settlement in the Balkans through the Dayton Accords might well be seen as his greatest achievement. Packer's account of his clever use of military power in support of high tempo and highly personalised diplomatic effort is engrossing. 'Holbrooke's diplomacy,' he says, was 'theatre for mortal stakes'.

Packer also reflects well on his subject's time as America's Ambassador to the UN in the late 1990s. This was he says 'a nonstop blur of purposeful activity... [which] saved the American position in the United Nations, which amounted to saving the United Nations'¹⁴. In this case, his formidable diplomatic skills were deployed in winning support from Congress for the US to pay its overdue arrears and remain in the UN, thus heading off—for 20 years at least—a lurch towards *America First*.

Though Australian ministers and officials had known and worked with Holbrooke over the years, it was as Ambassador to the UN that he engaged

our interests most closely. Packer's account has him contributing significantly to the passage of the Security Council Resolution that authorised the dispatch of the Australian-led international force to Dili in 1999. Through his Washington lens, Packer remarks that the successful peacekeeping mission which followed 'showed that the US—with a decent power in the region and American leadership—could stop atrocities and stabilise war-torn countries'.¹⁵

Holbrooke returned to the East Timor story later in a flying visit to Indonesia to broker an agreement on the management of the Indonesia–East Timor borders which was under threat from the activities of pro-Indonesian militias. Sir Peter Cosgrove's account of this in his autobiography is a nugget that escaped Packer's quarrying.

Cosgrove describes how Holbrooke, working as a 'tag-team' with the like-mannered US Ambassador to Jakarta, Bob Gelbard, 'dominated' the meeting he had convened in West Timor at a day's notice and hammered through an agreement (based in fact on a working paper Cosgrove had faxed to them the previous day but which was presented as a US proposal). Cosgrove admired the 'tour de force' and was delighted to have an agreement signed and sealed but admits to being 'a little stunned by Holbrooke's "cudgel diplomacy"'.¹⁶

14 Ibid., 414.

15 Ibid., 414.

16 General Peter Cosgrove, *My Story*, (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers Australia, 2006), 282–284.

Living in Washington at the time of my appointment as Australia's Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan (Australia's SRAP) in April 2009, I was immediately invited by Holbrooke to attend his SRAP team's daily meetings, in what he called his 'shitty little office' at the State Department. As in his own office so in the many SRAP meetings we attended, all the characteristics Packer describes were on display. The early morning theatre was not to be missed as the 'force of nature' bullied, cajoled, flattered and smoozed in ways that sometimes astonished even his personal staff. 'Stop the meeting!' he demanded on one occasion. 'The Secretary has to hear this—go get Hillary, she has to be here, say nothing until she arrives.' Of course she didn't come down from her seventh floor office to his on the first floor but the effect of this piece of theatre on those present was no less for that.

Holbrooke incidentally claimed a personal affection for Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. He was especially impressed by Rudd's 'Apology to the Stolen Generation' speech, which he claimed to have watched live. But, in the patronising way that had irritated Obama, he almost invariably called him 'young Kevin'.

In the end, Holbrooke assembled 40 or more SRAPs in an endeavour to write the foreign ministries of the world into the Afghan project. But his frustration grew as it became clear that with the Pentagon opposed to any negotiation

with the Taliban, the President would not countenance the case for a 'political solution'. Publicly his loyalty to Obama was undented but he remained convinced that if he could only meet the President personally he could bring him around.

The tragedy of this was captured in his demise: running late as he rushed to a meeting with Secretary Clinton from another futile attempt to lobby Obama's staff, he collapsed in her office and suffered a massive aorta tear. Tales of the instructions he continued to bark as he was being carried away to hospital became part of the legend. He died two days later. To have faded away in his own bed would never have befitted Holbrooke.

Nor was this the end. A memorial service held at Washington's Kennedy Centre in January 2011 was attended by two American Presidents, two UN Secretaries-General, several past Secretaries of State and military and other luminaries too numerous to name. Pakistan's President Zadari was there—and so was Tony Lake. The service embraced the full breadth of emotion: family grief as Kati Marton and then Holbrooke's two sons spoke, pathos as the boys described their dysfunctional relationships with their father, assertions of admiration and respect from the best and brightest of America's foreign policy establishment, endless tales about the man—all leading to what, in Australia, we would have called a good old fashioned roast.

For those of us present, the colour and flair and the range of feelings about Richard Holbrooke were on full display that day, and it's that display which has now been captured by George Packer in this remarkably readable biography.