

Holbrooke, Richard. To End A War. New York: Random House, 1998.

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For students of world politics, Richard Holbrooke has become something of a household name. In October 1998, he negotiated a last-minute deal with Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic thereby avoiding (or perhaps only postponing) NATO intervention in Kosovo. He has also tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to resolve the intractable dispute on the island of Cyprus. He was US Ambassador to Germany, is the nominee for the ambassadorship to the United Nations, and may eventually be the Secretary-of-State if the Democrats win the US election in 2000. However, his international reputation was secured as the author of the Dayton Peace Settlement in November 1995 which brought the fighting in the Bosnian Civil War to a halt. *To End a War* is Holbrooke's memoirs of his Bosnian mission.

On the fly-leaf of Holbrooke's memoirs, Arthur Schlesinger writes: "[t]his brilliant and remarkable book is both an absorbing narrative of the Balkan conflict and an invaluable contribution to the history of our time." In fact, it is neither and one will gain little knowledge of the conflict from this book. Instead, *To End A War* is a revealing account of how Holbrooke viewed the Bosnian conflict, which he saw as the most serious breakdown of collective security since 1945. It provides his explanation for Washington's intervention in the conflict - the US is *the* European hegemon and the war challenged that leadership. And, last, it is a first-hand account of the negotiations that led to the peace settlement at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton.

From his writing, one quickly appreciates that Holbrooke's attitude to the Bosnian war was partly motivated by humanitarian concerns. He was understandably appalled by the human suffering, and the apparent unwillingness of the European powers to exercise political leadership to stop the fighting. However, those feelings seem almost incidental to his story. Throughout the book, Holbrooke repeatedly argues that the US was the only power capable of ending the conflict - indeed, the image Holbrooke paints reveals continuity with earlier practitioners of US foreign policy. In 1913, Woodrow Wilson intervened in Mexico in an effort, as the history books tell us, "to teach them how to elect good men." Holbrooke's assumption that the US is still fated to provide similar leadership is found throughout the book and, as the last half demonstrates, clearly informs the peace settlement. The questionable longevity of that settlement is not due, we are told, to any flaw in the prescribed cure, but rather in the manner the remedy was applied.

In his foray into Balkan peace-making, Holbrooke earned a reputation for being direct and frequently discourteous. In fact, one gets the impression from this book that he probably revels in such an image. But the tough talk masks a profound ignorance of the cultures and politics of the peoples with which he was dealing. Holbrooke makes absolutely no effort to begin to understand the context within which the break-up of the Yugoslav federation took place and the Bosnian civil war erupted. The conflict is presented as irrational responses by ignorant people manipulated with criminal intent. And, remaining consistent with US policy, the Serbs (either in Bosnia or in Belgrade) are particularly at fault, followed by the rapacious and cunning Croats, while the Muslims are presented as little more than unwitting victims. The leaders of the three communities

embody these images. For those familiar with the history of the Balkans or the ethnic tensions that always existed in the former Yugoslavia, or even someone who followed the Bosnian civil war, such a view is difficult to endorse. His unquestioning acceptance of Serb culpability for the August 1995 bombing of the marketplace in Sarajevo that triggered US airstrikes (p. 91), and about which other senior Western officials have raised serious questions, is a case in point. Throughout the book, Holbrooke seems incapable of recognizing that politics is almost always more complex than "good versus evil," and that the three warring communities (Serb, Croat and Muslim) were fighting because they had conflicting political objectives - and still do. There is some basis, therefore, for agreeing with what one American in the Yugoslav delegation to the Dayton peace talks repeatedly told US officials - that they "didn't know shit about the Balkans." (p. 247)

To End a War is also interesting in that it provides a window on the making of US foreign policy during the Clinton administration. Throughout the text interdepartmental rivalries, the influence of personalities and the excess of emotion that pervades US policy-making is present. The most revealing anecdote comes early in the book. Holbrooke describes his attempt in June 1995 to explain to an uncomprehending Bill Clinton that the US will likely become involved in Bosnia as a result of the president's prior agreement to NATO support for a UN withdrawal. (pp. 67-68) If this episode is true, the reader will be astonished by the amateur nature of policy-making in the Clinton White House. One simply cannot imagine that such a "fly by the pants" approach to foreign policy would have been tolerated in the Reagan or Bush administrations.

Memoirs are the most difficult historical works to review. They are generally not well-researched, nor should they be. They are, instead, recollections and reminiscences by historically-important characters. While they are nonetheless valuable writings, one should read memoirs very critically. They can offer tremendous insight into the mindset of their author, but they remain political writings. In his biography of Bismarck, Lothar Gall wrote that the great Chancellor's memoirs were "essentially a polemical treatise, a work of undimmed political passion aimed entirely at the present." *To End A War* appears to be no different.

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