NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

RIP: Richard Holbrooke

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

One of the great things about living in Washington, D.C. is that you have these occasional Forrest Gump moments where you find yourself in the company of important people at an important moment and not exactly sure if God is sending you a signal or not. My best Forrest Gump moment happened with Dick Holbrooke, who died last night after the most storied career in diplomacy in American history.

It was 1995. I was going to Rome to attend a speech Cardinal John O?Connor was set to give on Thanksgiving Day, which necessitated traveling on the day before Thanksgiving, something I had avoided up until that time and have avoided ever since. Sitting on the plane at Washington?s National Airport, there was only one empty seat, which happened to be next to me. We had all been seated for ten minutes, and still the stewards had not closed the door and the car remained parked at the terminal. Another five minutes passed. I began to get nervous about my connection in Newark to the flight that would bring me to Rome.

Just then, onto the plane came Richard Holbrooke. He was a large, bearish man, impossible to miss. He plunked down in the seat next to me with an indifference appropriate to airplane travel. Of course, he looked tired. I say ?Of course,? because Holbrooke had just finished negotiating the Dayton Peace Accords the night before. The man sitting next to me was quite convinced, as were we all, that he had just earned himself a Nobel Peace Prize. (In the event, the Nobel went to equally deserving recipients, Bishop Carlos Belo and Mr. Jose Ramos-Horta of East Timor.) I turned to him, stuck out me hand, and said, ?Congratulations, Mr. Holbrooke.?

Once the plane was airborne, he opened his briefcase which contained about half a dozen packs of Tums antacids, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and a copy of The New Republic. I had recently published my first essay in that magazine, a review of a biography about Opus Dei founder Jose Maria Escriva. Holbrooke and I spoke about our mutual friend, Anna Husarska, the most courageous journalist on the planet, the Martha Gellhorn of our time. I had spoken to Anna that day and he had been with her and a few other journalists the night before, recounting stories about the negotiations that had brought the brutal war in the Balkans to an end. He said Husarska was one of the only journalists who took the time to understand what the hell was going on in the hellish parts of the world, which was true then and is true still.

I told Mr. Holbrooke about my work with Bosnian ex-pats. At the time, every Friday afternoon, the Bosnian Olympic four-man bobsled team gathered at Kramerbooks & Afterwords Café here in Washington, sometimes more often. Two of the team members worked at the café, the other two came by for a drink or a coffee. All four were from Sarajevo, but the team represented the ethnic diversity that was at risk from the war: One was a Serb and Orthodox, one was a Croat and a Catholic and two were Muslims, both highly secular Muslims, but Muslim enough to get them killed. The Serb, my friend Zoran, had lost his twin brother in the war, who had fought for the government of Bosnia against the Serb nationalists. His heroism in defense of Sarajevo did not prevent the Muslim-dominated government from tossing his parents? apartment once a month. One day, the Croat, came in looking sad and I asked what was wrong. His brother had lost both feet to a landmine the day before. This was the grim world created by Milosevic and Karadzic and the other butchers, a grimness that the eight or ten Bosniaks working at Kramer?s at any given time had tried to escape, but could not completely escape.

Some ideological purists denounced Holbrooke for his willingness to sit down and negotiate with an evil man like Milosevic. They said, correctly, that Milosevic was not different from Hitler except in scale. They also said, incorrectly, that Holbrooke?s willingness to negotiate with Milosevic dishonored the dead. ?If you can prevent the deaths of people still alive, you?re not doing a disservice to those already killed trying to do so,? Holbrooke rejoined.

As our plane landed in Newark, Holbrooke went to catch a flight to Colorado where his family was waiting for him. I caught my flight to Rome. We saw each other one more time, at the birthday party of another mutual friend and Holbrooke was kind of enough to remember our flight together, or diplomatic enough to pretend he remembered. He had had a lot on his mind that afternoon on the flight from D.C. to Newark and I would have forgiven him for forgetting. But, such was his intellect, he did not forget a thing.

They say he had a big ego, and that is undoubtedly true. But, unlike so many in Washington, whose ego is unjustified by skill or intelligence, Holbrooke usually was the smartest, most competent man in the room. That skill and that intelligence brought the horror in Bosnia to an end, the worst ? really the only ? military fallout from the collapse of Communism. He had deployed that skill and that intelligence recently in the equally intractable conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is no one to fill those shoes.

Most diplomats work in the shadows, and I can?t recall the death of a diplomat being treated as ?Breaking News? before. Holbrooke was bigger than life. If there is a Valhalla reserved for the great diplomats of all time, he is being welcomed there today. I suspect Talleyrand may be the only diplomat of sufficient distinction to welcome Holbrooke to the diplomats? hereafter. Dick Holbrooke served not only his country but the cause of peace with unusual distinction. Eternal rest grant unto him, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon him.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/28/2016 - 17:34*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/rip-richard-holbrooke