

International Third World Studies Journal and Review, Volume X, 1998/99

Book Review: To End a War

By Rory J. Conces
Department of Philosophy and Religion
University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Holbrooke, Richard. *To End a War*. New York: Random House, 1998. 408 pp.
\$27.95 (cloth).

[1] If asked to name career diplomats who have tackled some very difficult international crises, many foreign policy makers would put Richard Holbrooke near the top of the list. Not many negotiators have wielded moral principle, power, and reason as well as Holbrooke. His book on the Bosnia negotiations leading up to the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement is timely, given the ethnic cleansing that is being carried out in Kosovo, a southern province of Yugoslavia's Serb Republic. Once again we are faced with unrest in the Balkans. We have seen the daily newspaper headlines change from "24 Albanian Men Killed in Kosovo" and "Hopes Fade for New Kosovo Talks" to "NATO Air Campaign Expanded" and "Chinese Embassy Bombed in Belgrade." Although talk of "Bosnian Muslims," "the Bosnian Army" and "Srebrenica" has been replaced with "Kosovars," "the Kosovo Liberation Army," and "Rogovo," two of the main actors in the Bosnia negotiations have returned to put their stamp on the Kosovo negotiations: President Slobodan Milosevic and U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke. Unfortunately, Holbrooke's words that begin the last paragraph of his book seem to have come true: "*There will be other Bosnias in our lives.*" With that in mind, Holbrooke's book will best be appreciated as a harbinger of things to come in Kosovo and elsewhere.

[2] *To End a War* sketches the causal factors that produced the Yugoslav crisis and covers in detail the successes and failures of the various parties involved in the negotiations to end the conflict. The second chapter, entitled "The Greatest Collective Failure...", is perhaps the most interesting section of the book because it is here that Holbrooke attempts to make sense of the origins of "the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930s." According to Holbrooke, there is no easy explanation for the events that took place between 1990 and 1992. Instead, there are five major factors that brought about this tragedy. Holbrooke covers the range of precursors, touching on how the Yugoslav crisis was ignored because of more prominent events that ushered in the end of the Cold War; the death of Tito and the nationalist fervor that kept Communism in check; intervention fatigue that swept the United States after its war with Iraq; and the inept transition to a less paternalistic American policy in which America's European allies would take a greater responsibility for affairs occurring in their own back-yard. But what figures most prominently in his discussion runs counter to conventional wisdom on this matter. The widely held view, propagated by Rebecca West, Robert Kaplan, and Lawrence Eagleburger, would have us believe that the unrest in the Balkans is a feature of Balkan history, a feature that made this war an inevitability. Consequently, if the conflict was a result of ancient hatreds, then there was not

much that outsiders to the region could do to stop it. But this makes too much of history (especially the Serb defeat at the hands of the Turks in 1389), leaving the "web of animosity" as an unfortunate but enduring fact of Balkan life. As Holbrooke sees it, "Yugoslavia's tragedy was not foreordained. It was the product of bad, even criminal, political and financial gain." Television even had a role to play in unleashing the ugly head of "violence-provoking nationalism."

[3] Though this sheds some light on the onset of the Yugoslav wars, Holbrooke goes further by giving the reader a discrete chain of events that precipitated the conflict that pitted the Serbs against the Croats and the Muslims. First came the Yugoslav-Slovene war that resulted in the independence of Slovenia, which was followed by fighting between Serbs and Croats across Croatia. Eventually the European Community recognized Croatia as an independent nation, which prompted Bosnia to follow the Croatian lead and declare its own independence from a Yugoslavia that became increasingly Serb-dominated. Holbrooke's warning about Bosnia's independence, an event that seemed so innocent and perhaps righteous to the Europeans, was the most proximate event that led to the second Yugoslav war.

[4] Important as this discussion about the origins of the conflict is, the bulk of the book shows the political intrigue between leaders of the warring parties and the hostility that their forces waged against each other; the conflict among U.S. policy-makers; the passivity of the European leaders; and the disinclination of military leaders to adopt a policy of engagement under terms not of their choosing, as well as their reluctance to accept nation-building duties.

[5] Holbrooke is at his best in clarifying his view of the real culprits of the conflict and how they should be dealt with. Holbrooke makes it clear that the Serbs, those of Bosnia and Yugoslav proper, were the primary parties in the prolongation of the war and the atrocities committed on the people of Bosnia. There is no one more responsible for what took place than General Ratko Mladic, the commander of the Bosnian Serb Army; and Radovan Karadzic, the President of the Bosnian Serb Republic. The chronology of the voracity of the Serb attack is given for the years 1994 and 1995. Some of the more prominent events include the blatant Serb shelling of Sarajevo and other "UN safe areas" in May 1995; the taking of 350 UN peacekeepers hostage and using them as human shields; and the attack on Srebrenica, Zepa, and Gorazada during four days in July of 1995, resulting in the death of 7,079 Muslims, a figure provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and considered the largest single mass murder in Europe since WWII. It was as a result of such atrocities that Mladic and Karadzic were indicted as war criminals. Holbrooke considered the Pale Serbs to be thugs, a sentiment that was reaffirmed when in early 1996 they moved through the streets of Serb-controlled Sarajevo and intimidated fellow Serbs to leave the city and then set their dwellings on fire as a way to make sure that there was nothing for them to come back to. Even Slobodan Milosevic, the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, eventually tired of the war, perhaps because of the military successes that the Croat and Muslim forces were having as well as the occasional NATO bombings of Serb positions and the economic sanctions that the UN imposed in 1992 against his country, and decided to deal the Pale Serbs out of the picture. Milosevic's private denunciation of the Pale Serbs is quite telling when Holbrooke quotes him as saying, "I told you not to bring those idiots from Pale to any meeting."

[6] Of course, Holbrooke does not let us forget that Milosevic is also responsible because of his support of the war. During much of the war Milosevic supported the Bosnian Serbs, even

when his country's economy was being crushed by the sanctions placed on it by the international community. Yet Milosevic appeared to be "smart, charming, and evasive" to Holbrooke, who dealt with the Yugoslav leader during many talks, especially during the three weeks of the Dayton peace talks. What became more clear to Holbrooke was Milosevic's desire to wield power and to control the Serbs of Bosnia and Yugoslavia proper. It was Milosevic who decided to negotiate for the Bosnian Serbs. Although he was a tough negotiator, he understood the Western resolve to have a successful cease-fire and a multiethnic state of Bosnia; he usually buckled under to pressure and would bring his own pressure to bear on the Pale Serbs to work for a negotiated settlement. Holbrooke was tough with Milosevic, as is seen in his remarks to him over reducing Karadzic's influence, when the U.S. envoy said, "You cannot threaten our nation. What happens in Bosnia is important to us, but not decisive. For you these events are life and death."

[7] This toughness towards Milosevic and Bosnian Serb leaders like Karadzic, however, at times appears to be less guided by reason and more shaped by an urge for moral condemnation so as to justify battlefield outcomes. In response to Karadzic's charge that NATO air strikes had "assisted" the Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces in achieving some battlefield gains in September 1995, Holbrooke tells us that "while air strikes had undeniably aided the Federation, there was no truth to Karadzic's charge that the NATO air strikes had assisted the offensive." What appears to be a hasty dodge becomes clear a few pages later when he admits that the bombing "had the effect of helping the Muslims and Croats." Splitting hairs with the meanings of 'assisted,' 'aided,' and 'helped,' provides us with an interesting exercise in conceptual analysis, but it only glosses over what in fact was taking place on the battlefield, which was a genuine concern for the Serbs. This becomes even more troublesome when Holbrooke recalls his response to Milosevic's complaint on the same matter: "the Serbs brought it upon themselves." This exchange, it seems to me, has all the makings of a red herring. A reasoned assessment of the battlefield situation is absent, and a moral basis for retribution is given in its place.

[8] Although Holbrooke does breach the subject of hostilities between Croat and Muslim forces, he fails to acknowledge the full extent of this war within a war, as fighting broke out between these forces in central Bosnia in January 1993. Whether the cause for this breakdown included the division of Bosnia laid out by the Vance-Owen plan, what is clear is the viciousness with which the Croats and Muslims committed atrocities against each other. In the heart of Herzegovina were Croatian concentration camps at Gabela, Capljina, and Rodoc. Ironically, these camps were within a few miles of the Catholic holy place of Madjugorje; Muslim forces conducted their own atrocities against Croats, including those who remained in the Konjic area. Yet, Holbrooke's focus is well taken. Although all the groups were victimized, the Bosnian Muslims suffered a fate on a far worse scale than that experienced by the others. Holbrooke reminds us, too, that Croat and Muslim leaders were often as difficult and intransigent in negotiating as were Milosevic and the Pale Serbs. All used the same negotiating ploys in an attempt to gain advantage. On the one hand, the Croats and Muslims were less willing to bargain when their forces were making progress in the field. On the other hand, the Bosnian Serbs often showed the Western media some evidence of unilateral "compliance" with Western demands in order to prevent NATO military action. And all parties used the standard Balkan negotiating tactic of not accepting proposals from the other side without first attempting to change them to their own liking. When the warring parties were finally brought to Dayton to negotiate a permanent cease-fire as well as a multiethnic state, Holbrooke's improvisational style was at its finest. He orchestrated the proceedings well, even getting President Clinton to make a last minute phone call to nudge the Croatian President into giving up the largest share of a land swap.

Holbrooke's recounting of the details of the three weeks of negotiating in Dayton makes for interesting reading, including the "napkin shuttle" (reminiscent of William Ury's posting of newsprint) between the Prime Minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haris Silajdzic, and Milosevic over the size of the corridor between Gorazde and Sarajevo.

[9] A major strength of *To End a War* is that it shows the reader in a concrete, detailed way Holbrooke's formula for success in getting the warring parties to the negotiating table: the linkage of diplomacy with the use of military force. As Holbrooke notes, strategic interests were important in drawing the U.S. into the Balkan crisis, but what seems to be of particular importance in securing a diplomatic solution through the use of military force was moral and humanitarian considerations, particularly after the massacre at Srebrenica. Such atrocities played an important part in formulating Holbrooke's view of the crisis. Early in 1993, even before he had an official role in the Balkan peace process, he advised senior U.S. officials to use force against the Serbs, including Serbia proper; to brand certain individuals as war criminals; and to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia. But his advocacy of the use of NATO air power, including the use of Tomahawk cruise missiles against Bosnian Serb targets in western Bosnia, was usually met with staunch opposition from U.S. and Allied military commanders. The Pentagon disliked the idea of committing planes to an air campaign to pursue a limited political objective. Some Allied commanders, on the other hand, objected to the use of air power because they had troops on the ground. British, French, and Dutch commanders had grave concerns that their personnel would be harmed or taken hostage and used as human shields.

[10] But the resistance by the military to commit to the negotiating teams' objectives did not stop with air power. It carried over to the use of ground troops in the Implementation Force (IFOR). It was the scope of IFOR's mission that showed the true extent to which Holbrooke and the Pentagon did not see eye to eye. The initial agreement was for IFOR to use force to defend itself, to separate contending parties, and to enforce the cease-fire. This was in keeping with the "minimalist" position of the Pentagon, a limited and clear mission, the means to which the military could control to their liking. Allow the military to do what it knows best; do not allow "mission creep" to muddy the waters. Finding such a "too little, too late" strategy to be inadequate, Holbrooke adopted a "maximalist" approach. Although he made his start as a Foreign Service Officer in Vietnam in the 1960s and was well acquainted with the Somalia disaster, Holbrooke was not swayed by what some call the "Vietmalia syndrome." What was called for, Holbrooke believed, was IFOR embarking on a secondary mission to support the peace process, including making sure roads were open to travel, assisting in the election process, and arresting war criminals. The use of the military as a tool to promote the civilian mission was essential for its success, as well as, Holbrooke notes, for a more timely departure of those same forces. Ultimately the Pentagon compromised and it was agreed that the military would accept the authority to carry out this larger mission, but would not accept the obligation to do it. It would be a matter of discretion on the part of the military commanders.

[11] With all the difficulties that were foreseen prior to the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, as well as those problems that have surfaced since that landmark day, Holbrooke believes the agreement to be a good one. It brought a cease-fire to the fighting that raged for so many years, and laid the foundation for a multiethnic state; by so doing, this agreement reflects Holbrooke's view that U.S. strategic interests and concern for human rights--the twin pillars of U.S. involvement in the Balkan crisis--are not diametrically opposed but support and reinforce each other.

[12] Overall, Holbrooke's book provides an insightful account of the difficulties that beset those who attempt to understand and resolve ethnic conflicts. One of the book's attractions is Holbrooke's profound attachment to the cause of peace and the need to end atrocities perpetrated on a populace by "killers [who are]...driven by ethnic prejudice rekindled by ultranationalism and demagogues." It offers a fascinating discussion of power and nationalism and the lengths to which leaders will go to preserve their nation's identities. Although *To End a War* convincingly shows how a diplomatic effort can be successful when it is linked to military coercion, Holbrooke's optimism and clear vision of the degree to which various parties were evil and the way in which they should be dealt with, should raise larger questions about the nature of humanitarian intervention. Should military force only be used against the perpetrator of most of the human rights atrocities, thereby ruling out the use of force against victims turned victimizers? Should leaders of sovereign nations be demonized in order to secure easy approval of military intervention by regional and international organizations? These questions remain unanswered. Nonetheless, reading Richard Holbrooke's book will help readers begin to develop an understanding of the complexity of ethnic conflicts, the difficulties involved in their resolution, and the challenges of nation building.

Site maintenance done by
the [Department of Philosophy and Religion](#)
[University of Nebraska at Omaha.](#)

All rights reserved 1998/99