

Richard Holbrooke and American Empire

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Richard Holbrooke's death this week at the age of 69 brings to a close one of the most extraordinary diplomatic careers in American history. Holbrooke's career began in 1962 and continued until his death. During these years, not only did Holbrooke work for every Democratic president from Kennedy to Obama, but he was involved in one way or another with many of the most important foreign policy issues facing the U.S. including the war in Vietnam, the reunification of Germany, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the war in Afghanistan, during a career of nearly fifty years.

Holbrooke's 48 year diplomatic career was coterminous with the country's evolution from one of two competing superpowers to being the world's only superpower to being broadly viewed as declining relative to other powers. Reflecting on Holbrooke's service underscores just how short a time it took for all of this to occur. When Holbrooke's career began, the U.S. viewed itself as being locked into a struggle for global supremacy with Soviet communism. The stakes in that struggle, like the struggle against fascism in which the U.S. was locked when Holbrooke was born, were extremely high. Holbrooke's died as he was in the front lines of another struggle which the U.S. viewed as global with extremely high stakes.

In 1962, a young diplomat like Holbrooke might have thought that the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union would be eternal, or he might have thought that the U.S. would inevitably win that struggle. It is unlikely, however, that that young diplomat could have known that the struggle against different global threats, even after the fall of the Soviet Union, would become the norm for the U.S. and frame American foreign policy well into the 21st century.

Holbrooke began his career working for USAID, an agency which was less than two years old at that time. In those early days of USAID, it was not clear how long the agency would last, how much it would grow or what program areas it would include. Over the course of Holbrooke's career, the agency where he started working, expanded in size and scope working to help people more or less all over the world to live better, healthier lives, improve their governance and strengthen their economies.

Between 1962 and 2010, U.S. foreign policy was redefined. The early Cold War years were a time when security interests and the struggle against the Soviet Union was the driving force in foreign policy. One of the defining characteristics of American foreign policy during the course of Holbrooke's career was that national security needs kept expanding even after the Cold War ended, thus ensuring that the global U.S. presence, whether in the form of military bases or assistance programs would also expand.

The parallels between Vietnam, where Holbrooke started his career and Afghanistan, his last position, could not have been lost on a man with Holbrooke's intellect and experience. How he interpreted those parallels is less clear. Nonetheless, in 1962 the central issue behind U.S. involvement in Vietnam was the struggle against Communism, just as in 2002, the central issue behind the war in Afghanistan was the struggle against terrorism. By 2010 in Afghanistan and 1970 in Vietnam, if not sooner in both cases, the central question facing the U.S. was how to get out. Today, the question of how to get out of Afghanistan is, naturally, deeply tied to the challenge of rethinking American foreign policy in a period of relative decline of American power.

The growth of USAID, the U.S. presence around the world and the recognition that there will always be an enemy of global scale are just some of the ways the U.S. empire developed over the course of the last 48 years. Richard Holbrooke's ability to thrive throughout this period speaks to his exceptional skills and commitment. Nonetheless, it seems like the questions of how all this happened, whether anybody wanted it to happen and whether we can change it, should not be overlooked. At some point during the long arc of Holbrooke's career, the U.S. took on a sense of both responsibility and ability to make an impact that was not commiserate with reality. Determining how to address this is one of the macro-challenges of the post-Holbrooke era.