Dear Friends and Colleagues,

This morning the global health community lost a great friend, with the passing of Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke. Currently serving as the Obama administration’s special envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, Holbrooke suffered a heart attack during a State Department meeting in Washington on Friday, underwent open heart surgery and was determined to have a torn aorta. He was sixty-nine years old.

I am proud to have known Ambassador Holbrooke for twenty-one years; I interviewed him countless times while working as a journalist, and watched him in action as he literally changed history. I ultimately, like so many journalists that observed him in action, became his friend and coauthored an opinion piece with him in the Washington Post. My notebooks are full of quips and insights whispered into my ears by Holbrooke during meetings ranging from UN Security Council sessions to the Telluride Mountain Film Festival (which is run by his son, David). I have always been struck by his ability to swiftly read an individual’s character, an organization’s flaws, and a nation’s cultural bias.

Holbrooke is, of course, best remembered for his remarkable achievements negotiating peace in the former Yugoslavia, culminating in the Dayton Peace Accords. He built upon his experience as a very young man, taking part in the U.S. team that negotiated an end to the Vietnam War, at the Paris Peace Talks. Holbrooke served every president of the United States in some capacity, from Lyndon B. Johnson forward. His association with the Clintons proved the most fruitful, as President Bill Clinton named him special negotiator for the Yugoslavian situation, and subsequently the U.S. ambassador to
the United Nations. Hillary Clinton, now secretary of state, called upon Holbrooke to solve another seemingly intractable situation in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I joked with him after the announced appointment, noting that most observers considered the Af-Pak situation disastrous, and unlikely to be resolved diplomatically. “They should ask Milosevic how it feels when Holbrooke comes to town,” I joked. “Look out, war-lords!” Characteristically, Holbrooke’s eyes twinkled mischievously, he let out a barrel of laughter, and in an instant snapped serious, saying, “Thanks for your vote of confidence.” In his landmark 1998 book To End a War, Holbrooke provided a blow-by-blow description of how his team forced Milosevic and his associates to the Dayton peace table, bringing an end to the carnage. Being half-Croatian, with family in the region, I always admired his role and his canny ability to read the troubled and complex history of the Balkans. The Holbrooke book concludes (with his italicized emphasis):

“There will be other Bosnias in our lives — areas where early outside involvement can be decisive, and American leadership will be required. The world’s richest nation, one that presumes to great moral authority, cannot simply make worthy appeals to conscience and call on others to carry the burden. The world will look to Washington for more than rhetoric the next time we face a challenge to peace.”

The ink had barely dried on the Dayton Treaty when Holbrooke had been sworn in as UN ambassador and turned his attention to another issue requiring “moral authority” to avert “a challenge to peace”: the HIV pandemic. No other leading diplomat in the world was tackling the AIDS epidemic at that time, as the disease was fundamentally wrapped in prejudice against the very people most at risk for contracting HIV infection: gay men, intravenous drug users, prostitutes, and marginalized poor people. Holbrooke recognized the terrible toll HIV was exacting, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, during the early 1990s. He strongly felt that the pandemic represented a challenge to the economies, cultures, and national securities of hard-hit regions. Moreover, while serving in an administration that largely ignored the African carnage wrought by HIV, Holbrooke argued that the virus represented a security threat to the UN system and to the United States. It was not a popular stance in foreign policy circles, and proved controversial even among AIDS advocates, many of whom still resent any implication that the pandemic has security ramifications.

Nevertheless, Holbrooke prevailed in the UN Security Council, pushing a resolution that mandated HIV testing for soldiers participating in UN peacekeeping operations. Given subsequent allegations of rape and forced prostitution carried out by UN soldiers, especially in Congo and central Africa, Holbrooke’s insistence that peacekeepers ought not to be vectors of disease proved vital and prescient. (Today similar controversies have arisen in Haiti, where UN peacekeepers are accused of unwittingly bringing cholera to the island nation.)

Toward the end of the Clinton administration Holbrooke grew weary of arguing with the White House about the significance of the AIDS epidemic. Though President Clinton rhetorically lent support to the battle against the pandemic, his government never donated more than $300 million
annually to the global fight against AIDS, and the White House offered no genuine leadership. Holbrooke worked with allies inside the UN and UNAIDS to set up the first UN General Assembly special session devoted to a disease, which convened after his tenure as ambassador was over in the summer of 2001.

Holbrooke, the UN ambassador, with secretary of state Madeleine Albright, Anthony Lake (current head of UNICEF), and Vice President Al Gore

Then-vice president Al Gore, at Holbrooke’s urging, addressed a special session of the UN Security Council in early 2000. Gore weighed in on the Debate on Impact of AIDS on Peace and Security in Africa, echoing Holbrooke sentiments regarding HIV and national security and calling for a global financial and political commitment to fight the pandemic and provide treatment to people living in countries too poor to provide anti-HIV medicines without external assistance. Following Gore’s defeat in the 2000 presidential race to George W. Bush, Holbrooke stepped down as UN ambassador. In a moving special meeting of the Security Council, diplomats from all over the world sang Holbrooke’s praises and made jokes at his expense, acknowledging the unique roles he had played in an organization that traditionally begrudges U.S. power and influence.

In 2001 Holbrooke entered the business world, but characteristically continued to do battle over the foreign policy issues he considered paramount. At the top of his list was the AIDS pandemic. He recognized that the governments of the world would not get past the stigmas associated with the disease to take appropriate actions unless the economic powers that influenced their business climates took the first steps. He was struck by the innovations made in South Africa by the large mining companies, which provided infected miners and their families free HIV testing and treatment without fear of job loss. Other companies, chiefly in the fashion and entertainment industries, had pioneered anti-discrimination policies that guaranteed continued employment and treatment for HIV+ employees.

In August 2001 Holbrooke launched the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, or GBC, serving as its president and CEO until his January 2009 appointment as State Department special envoy. Though the GBC started with a handful of already-dedicated corporate members, such as MAC Cosmetics, fashion’s Kenneth Cole and entertainment giant Viacom, Holbrooke built a giant that today boasts the membership of many of the Fortune 500 companies, across a broad swath of industries.
During his more recent tenure inside the Obama administration, Holbrooke has struggled to find the right balance of the so called “Three D’s” in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Development, Diplomacy and Defense. He strongly believed that women’s healthcare, child vaccination, provision of safe drinking water and access to emergency medical care were fundamental tools in efforts to bring peace to the region and end the influence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. But he was no Pollyanna: Holbrooke knew that the allied military effort had to succeed, and diplomacy could accomplish little without the Pentagon’s leverage.

It is hard to imagine any individual on today’s world stage that can fill Holbrooke’s shoes. A tall and large man, Richard Holbrooke filled a room with his sometimes bombastic presence. He could, with genuine tactical calculation, shift an assemblage or cocktail party in a moment from mischief, humor and frivolity to deadly-serious negotiation. His laughter resonated, as did his anger. No world leader could doubt his sincerity when Richard Holbrooke turned to look a prime minister in the eye, waved an index finger in the air, and said, “You are not doing enough to stop the spread of HIV in your country.”

A couple of years ago I expressed frustration over my work to Holbrooke during a lunch in one of his favorite Manhattan haunts. He asked a few probing questions, mulled my answers as he chomped on his salmon, and then grinned because he had the answer I was seeking. “Your problem, Laurie, is that you are focused on outcomes. That is as it should be. But most of the people you are having trouble with are process-oriented, and you have no patience with process. We share that.”

Richard Holbrooke untimely passing is a loss for world peace, global health efforts, and American diplomacy, writ large.

Sincerely,

Laurie Garrett
Senior Fellow for Global Health