

# Holbrooke on Iraq, Mandela, and the Quest for World Peace

An Interview with the Honorable  
Richard C. Holbrooke, Vice Chairman, Perseus L.L.C., New York



Hon. Richard C. Holbrooke

**EDITORS' NOTE** Reflecting upon recent world events, veteran diplomat and Perseus VC Richard Holbrooke notes the powerful effects of U.S. foreign policy in shaping the course of history, particularly in the Middle East – “the most volatile area in the world today.” Indeed, so complex are “the issues facing Middle Eastern countries” that “no single solution exists,” he contends. Rather, the problems “need to be tackled individually, within a broader framework,” and a failure to do so may result in “a protracted period of instability that will inevitably spread, particularly in the Muslim world.” Within this context, the removal of Saddam Hussein was justified, Holbrooke maintains, as “the Iraqi people and the world will be much better off without Saddam in the long run.” However, although the war in Iraq “was necessary to achieve stability in the Middle East,” Holbrooke argues that “the timing and the manner in which the policy was carried out” may well have “weakened our position throughout the region” and beyond. For, “while our military prowess remains undiminished and must continue to remain undiminished,” the United States has “lost respect and support around the world,” he believes, and this situation “needs to be dealt with urgently.”

Prior to assuming his current posi-

tion at Perseus, Holbrooke most recently served as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and was a member of President Clinton’s cabinet from 1999 to 2001. As assistant secretary of state for Europe (1994-1996), he was the chief architect of the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war in Bosnia. He later served as President Clinton’s special envoy to Bosnia and Kosovo and special envoy to Cyprus on a pro-bono basis as a private citizen. From 1993 to 1994, he was the U.S. ambassador to Germany. During the Carter administration (1977-1981), he served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and was in charge of U.S. relations with China at the time Sino-American relations were normalized in December 1978. After joining the Foreign Service in 1962, he went to Vietnam for three years, then served in the State Department, and the Johnson White House. He was director of the Peace Corps in Morocco, managing editor of Foreign Policy magazine, and has held senior positions at Credit Suisse First Boston (vice chairman) and Lehman Brothers (managing director).

In addition to his responsibilities as founding chairman of the American Academy in Berlin, president and CEO of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS, and chairman of the Asia Society, Holbrooke serves on the boards of AIG; the American Museum of Natural History; the National Endowment for Democracy; Human Genome Sciences; the Africa-America Institute; the Citizens Committee for New York City; the Council on Foreign Relations; Quebecor World, Inc.; and Refugees International. Holbrooke is the author of numerous articles and books, and the recipient of 19 honorary degrees and several awards, including seven Nobel Peace Prize nominations.

**COMPANY BRIEF** Perseus L.L.C. is a merchant bank and private equity fund management company with offices in Washington, DC, and New York. Since its founding in 1995 by Frank H. Pearl, Perseus has invested in a broad range of

transactions, from venture-capital financings to leveraged buyouts and debt-market investments. Perseus generally invests in companies in whose strategic planning, operations, and development it can participate, and thereby add significant value to the investment. The company and its affiliates manage six investment funds with total commitments in excess of \$2 billion.

**There seems to be no end to the problems in the Middle East. Is there any possibility for peace at all?**

It’s clearly the most volatile area in the world today. If the problems that plague it are not resolved, I believe there will be a protracted period of instability that will inevitably spread, particularly in the Muslim world. Therefore, for our own national security, we cannot ignore these problems. The issues facing Middle Eastern countries need to be tackled individually, within a broader framework. No single solution exists for this range of issues, but we must recognize that our national security is at stake.

**Was the United States wrong to move into Iraq in 2003?**

For many years, I have believed that the removal of Saddam Hussein was necessary to achieve stability in the Middle East – necessary, but not sufficient. While I supported President Bush on this issue, frankly, I am deeply distressed by the timing and the manner in which the policy was carried out. It weakened our position throughout the region, even though the Iraqi people and the world will be much better off without Saddam in the long run.

**It seems that, as a result of the war in Iraq, the rest of the world now hates the “arrogant” United States. Is this correctable?**

I do not believe that the majority of people in the Muslim world hate the United States. However, there is a growing gap between the United States and the Muslim world, which, if not addressed successfully, will set us on the road to a catastrophic confrontation between Islam and the West. This confrontation will be

made all the more difficult by the fact that millions of Muslims live very peacefully in the United States and Europe. Those people do not hate “us”; in fact, they are part of “us.” I believe that some Muslims envy us for the economic success and freedom that Americans all too often take for granted. So some of the rage against us stems from envy and some of it stems from anger at themselves for having failed to take advantage of the vast natural resources beneath their soil.

#### **What will happen in Afghanistan?**

The United States allowed the Afghan warlords, who are also drug lords, who tore the country apart a decade ago, to return to power after we ousted the Taliban. By doing so, the administration weakened the central government of President Karzai, which they said they were trying to strengthen. As a result, we are trapped for a long-term military presence in Afghanistan, with no discernable exit in sight. Afghanistan is important: As one of the most remote countries on Earth, if left to its own devices it could easily become a sanctuary for terrorists plotting evil against the United States and other countries.

#### **Can the United States afford the expense of a continued military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq?**

The United States certainly can afford whatever is necessary to protect its own national interest. We have done it before and we will do it again, whatever the cost.

#### **With the presidential election coming up, do you think U.S. foreign policy will change? You are a friend and adviser to the Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry.**

This is clearly a hypothetical issue. The fact is, we have lost respect and support around the world, and, while our military prowess remains undiminished and must continue to remain undiminished, our alliances have been weakened. That needs to be dealt with urgently. If John Kerry wins, I am confident he would make this a matter of high priority.

#### **China seems to be the nation of the future as far as trade is concerned. What will happen there?**

Getting policy toward China right is one of the United States’ highest imperatives. China is neither an ally nor an enemy. It has a different political system than ours and routinely violates some of the most basic human rights. At the same time, it must be recognized. There has been dramatic improvement in the lives of the Chinese in the 30 years since Nixon opened the door to China, and particularly in the 25 years since Jimmy Carter established full diplomatic relations. I was assistant secretary of state at that time, and I am proud to have played a part in establishing those full diplomatic relations. The Chinese, today, are not free in our sense of the word, but they no longer live in the totalitarian hellhole of the Cul-

tural Revolution. In the long run, it will evolve into a more democratic society. That is inevitable.

#### **What is going to happen in the war against AIDS? Will it ever end?**

The war against HIV/AIDS will be with us for the rest of our lives. It is probably the worst health crisis in at least 700 years. It is also a political, social, and economic crisis that threatens the stability of many countries. It is not just an African disease. Countries like China, India, and Russia are in denial, and because they are in denial, the disease threatens to spread even further. In fact, it spreads to between 12,000 and 15,000 people every day. That’s four to five times the number of people killed on September 11, 2001. The most ominous statistic of all is that 95 percent of the people who are HIV positive in the world do not know it.

When I left the United Nations in 2001, I was asked by Kofi Annan to become the head of the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS [GBC] – the world’s leading business nongovernmental organization fighting this problem. It then had fewer than 20 members; today it has 140, and is growing rapidly. We are intent on spreading awareness of this extremely serious issue. There is no simple answer to the AIDS problem, but testing must become more widespread and anti-retroviral medicines must be made available in large numbers to people who test positive. The GBC is trying to mobilize businesses to take a role.

#### **You’re chairman of the Asia Society. What does that organization do?**

The Asia Society does three things: First, it runs major policy discussions on Asian issues. Second, it has a great museum on Park Avenue and 70th Street in New York, which contains the Rockefeller collection of Asian art and hosts rotating exhibitions. And third, it runs a major educational program with grants from foundations, including a very big one from the Gates Foundation.

#### **You are also chairman of the American Academy in Berlin. How did you get involved with that?**

I happened to be in Germany as the U.S. ambassador to that country when the American troops were withdrawn from Berlin, and I felt strongly that we needed a follow-up presence that would focus on the cultural field. So the American Academy in Berlin was formed, with the cochairmanship of Henry Kissinger and Richard Von Weizsäcker. I became chairman when I left government service. They are still active as honorary chairmen.

The academy is now in its sixth year, and we are very proud of it. Americans come to the academy for one semester or less to pursue studies in political, economic, cultural, or musical curricula. We have strong endowed fellowships from

companies like DaimlerChrysler, JPMorgan Chase, CitiGroup, and Holtzbrinck.

#### **How do you find time for all of these commitments, in addition to your position with Perseus L.L.C.?**

I care about these issues, and each of these three organizations reflects a part of my career. My day job – the one that I spend the most time on – is as vice chairman of Perseus L.L.C., a private equity group firm. Having spent 15 years on Wall Street, when I left the government in 2001, I decided it would be more interesting and more challenging to go into private equity. I have enjoyed it enormously and Perseus has enjoyed a really successful run.

#### **You have worked with many important figures throughout your career. When you get to know such people, do they lose their hero status?**

Some people gain in stature when you know them well, and others diminish. I have never had a mentor, but I have learned a lot of life lessons from certain people. One example is Averell Harriman [former U.S. ambassador to Russia, former U.S. secretary of commerce, and former governor of New York], for whom I worked during the Vietnam peace negotiations in Paris in 1968. He was in his late 70s at that point and was still fighting for what he believed in with tenacity and courage. He would see right through issues and get to the conclusions.

The greatest person I have ever met, bar none, is Nelson Mandela, and I have gotten to know him very well. No man is perfect, not even Mandela, but he took history by the throat, seized it, and changed its course through a combination of moral authority, vision, strategic sense, practical genius, and a remarkable capacity for forgiveness toward the thugs who ran South Africa under Apartheid. Mandela was able to spend 27 years in prison and emerge without any personal bitterness, and even with his sense of humor intact. It’s simply unbelievable. Everyone in the European and U.S. intelligence communities thought Apartheid would end with a blood bath. Mandela ended it peacefully, and for that he deserves the undying appreciation of everyone in the world.

I have known other great men. Deng Xiaoping was an extraordinary man, and I was fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with him. He was a visionary and a man of exceptional force, who came back three times from exile to lead his country into the modern era. However, his image will always be blotted by what happened in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989. That incident should not have happened, and the leaders he chose to succeed him both came down. So while Deng was a huge historic figure, I would still put Nelson Mandela at the top of the list. ●