A History Maker  
For All His Flaws

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

ONE AUTUMN afternoon in 1979 in Bangkok, I had just come out of the walled US embassy compound on Wireless Road. I crossed the road to hail a cab when I noticed the siren and flashing lights. The embassy’s iron gates had opened to let out the limousine of US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, accompanied by the noise and commotion of the usual police escorts. I knew who was in the tinted-glass limo, because I had just spent the past half hour in the embassy talking with Holbrooke about developments in Indochina. Suddenly, his limo swerved towards the pavement where I was standing and came to a halt, causing confusion among the police cars in the motorcade. The door swung open, revealing Holbrooke’s six-foot frame. He leaned out and called me to come close. “Nayan, I forgot to ask you, what’s happening to your Pakistan correspondent?” He was asking about Salamat Ali, my late colleague, the Pakistan correspondent of the New York Times. Holbrooke looked at me on the pavement where I was standing and came to a halt, causing confusion among the police cars in the motorcade. The door swung open, revealing Holbrooke’s six-foot frame. He leaned out and called me to come close. “Nayan, I forgot to ask you, what’s happening to your Pakistan correspondent?” He was asking about Salamat Ali, my late colleague, the Pakistan correspondent of the New York Times. Holbrooke looked at me and called me to come close. “Nayan, I forgot to ask you, what’s happening to your Pakistan correspondent?”

Packer’s fast-paced narrative, with vivid portrayals of the milieu Holbrooke inhabited, replete with ample quotations from his unfinished memoirs and notes, tracks his life through three main trajectories of his diplomatic career — Vietnam, Bosnia and Afghanistan. As a young foreign service officer beginning his career in Vietnam, his ambition was to open a new chapter by normalizing relations with Vietnam. He failed. His hope of avoiding the disaster of Vietnam in Afghanistan, as a young diplomat in Kabul, was that he would end in disaster for Beijing. Barely 10 days after Sino-US normalization, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, overthrowing Pol Pot, and two weeks after the normalization, China launched an invasion to “teach Vietnam a lesson.” That would end in disaster for Beijing.

Packer writes, “He loved history — so much that he wanted to make it.” Holbrooke did make history and plenty of irony to accompany it. After having drafted countless campaign speeches by Jimmy Carter calling for human rights, in 1980, as Carter’s principal official for Asia, Holbrooke led the drive to recognize the murderous Khmer Rouge as the legitimate representatives of Cambodia at the UN. He said it was the “single most difficult thing” he had ever done, “but as a public official, I had to swallow hard.”

This unconventional biography, written like a novel without notes or index, is a joy to read. The book is a singular achievement, bringing alive the last decades when America counted characters such as Holbrooke in the halls of policy-making. Perhaps with a bit of hyperbole that biographers are allowed, Packer made Holbrooke’s life a metaphor for the whole of America. “He was our man,” he writes. “Our confidence and energy, our reach and grasp, our excess and blindness — they were not so different from Holbrooke’s.”

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