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Roberta Oster Sachs: Lessons from Richard Holbrooke

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RICHMOND

When I was a young producer at CBS News, diplomat Richard Holbrooke was one of my guiding stars. His untimely death on Dec. 13 reminded me of our first meeting, and why I have always admired his commitment to human rights.

I first encountered Holbrooke at an emergency meeting about the crisis in Bosnia, held at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in New York on Aug. 10, 1992. It was just days after horrific footage was broadcast worldwide of hundreds of emaciated prisoners in concentration camps in the former Yugoslavia. I was there to research the story for CBS News, and Holbrooke was there to shake people up and mobilize them to action.

At the time, Holbrooke was a managing director at Lehman Brothers, and served on the IRC board. He was stepping out of his Wall Street suite to join an IRC team on a fact-finding mission to Bosnia to investigate reports of “ethnic cleansing.”

They would travel with a United Nations convoy to Banja Luka, a dangerous Serbian stronghold in the north, to assess the situation and determine what aid was needed. Holbrooke had served previously as an assistant secretary of state, but at this time, he was a private citizen who told me that he could not stand by and watch. He had a fiery determination to find out the truth: Was this genocide again in Europe?

Holbrooke was a passionate risk-taker with an encyclopedic knowledge of Central European politics, and I desperately wanted to cover this mission. I knew that network-TV footage of the Bosnian camps could mobilize the American public and put pressure on the U.S. government to act.

I rushed back to CBS and pitched the idea. The answer was a flat “no.” CBS brass said the area that Holbrooke was headed to was among the most dangerous on the planet, and they would not send me to accompany Holbrooke. I was furious, but just as I was about to leave the CBS executive suite, my boss offered another option: “We can have Holbrooke shoot and narrate the trip himself,” she said. “Give him one

of our handhelds and teach him how to use it.”

“I’ll do it,” Holbrooke said, when I ran this idea by him. “I’ll do whatever it takes to get the story out.” Since he was leaving the next day, the only time that Holbrooke had to learn how to operate the camera was in a car ride from mid-town to his Wall Street office. So in 30 minutes, in a limo winding through Manhattan traffic, I taught Richard Holbrooke how to take our gear to a war zone.

A few days later, I learned that Holbrooke and his team were nearly killed by a land mine on their journey, but they made it back alive. With intense anticipation, I loaded Holbrooke’s video in the CBS editing room. His footage showed sickly-looking men behind barbed wire and enormous refugee camps. He had also interviewed people about massacres by Serbian soldiers. But the footage, unfortunately, was too dark and shaky. It was not “broadcast quality,” my boss said, so CBS could not air it.

When I told Holbrooke that CBS could not run the images he had worked so hard to obtain, he was, once again, the consummate diplomat, “I understand, I’m not the best cameraman,” he said, “but did you see the camps? The conditions?” He wanted to know exactly how many CBS journalists had seen his footage. He cared most that we were educated about the issues and insisted that we keep covering these stories. “Don’t forget about the people of the former Yugoslavia, Roberta. Don’t forget this story.”

Holbrooke continued to make missions to the region, and just six months after we met, he was appointed to an ambassadorship in the Clinton administration. In 1995, he brokered one of the most comprehensive peace settlements of the 20th Century, the Dayton Accords for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He went on to represent the U.S. at the United Nations and made peace deals in war-torn areas around the world. This committed public servant was also a husband, father and grandfather. A fearless crusader for human rights, Richard Holbrooke has saved many lives around the world. His death is a great loss, but I hope that his example will inspire others to work for human rights and peace.

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