

Holbrooke testifies on Bosnia, Bush, Chirac

Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, appeared before the House International Relations Committee on July 28. Following are excerpts from his testimony.

Holbrooke: I think in the enormous noise of this week on Bosnia—the vote in the Senate, the situation on the ground, the refugees—it was perhaps insufficiently noted that the secretary general of the United Nations relinquished his fingers on the U.N. side of the dual key and that Mr. [Yasushi] Akashi also did likewise. . . . The dual key is one of the worst ideas ever invented.

The decks are now being cleared for action. By that I mean air action.

On the Bush administration

Rep. James Moran, Jr. (D-Va.): But, we can go back to the point where Admiral Boorda, I believe, recommended that we stop the shelling of Dubrovnik [in Croatia] and the Bush/Baker policy team decided we ought not intervene at that point. It was clear that if they were successful, it would move on and certainly it did. We knew the type of thugs that were implementing Bosnian Serb aggression, and yet we continued to maintain that this was an internal civil war when we knew better. . . .

Holbrooke: . . . I agree with you about Dubrovnik. The moment to stop this thing was when Vukovar and Dubrovnik were being destroyed. The fundamental mistakes—the United States voted for that arms embargo. How could we have made that vote in the United Nations and then reaffirmed it in 1991-1992? It was wrong. . . . I think the arms embargo was the most outrageous thing to impose. But now we're stuck with it. . . .

Congressman [Manzullo] . . . I want to point out, since you've unfortunately attacked my President, that the arms embargo was voted on twice in the previous administration and it was one of the most disgraceful votes in the history of the United States. It was wrong at the time and we inherited the debris.

On French President Chirac

Let us note, by the way, in passing, and in fairness to the French and the British, particularly the French, that 42 French have died in Bosnia—on an American population base, that would be over 200 Americans—and that Chirac, facing that problem, has asked for reinforcements, a rapid

reaction force. He doesn't want to pull out; he wants to get tougher. I have great admiration for President Chirac. I think he's on the right track.

. . . I do not believe it's true to say that President Chirac is opposed to air strikes. He has taken a very tough stand.

Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.): You alluded to President Chirac in your statement. Clearly, he has a different style than his predecessor. Do you see any changes in substance vis-à-vis the French policy, as it will affect American policy and in our relationship between France and the United States as a result of President Chirac?

Holbrooke: Oh, there's going to be a tremendous change. For the last few years, France had cohabitation; a President of one party, a prime minister of another. The President, for whom we all have great respect, was old and not in good health. You now have a united French government under a dynamic President, who, I might add, I have had occasion to spend a good deal of time with. I'm very impressed by the fact that he knows America better than any previous French leader in history. He's lived here, he's worked here, he's famously a Howard Johnson's employee. He is a new kind of French leader, and the group he has assembled around him is very, very impressive. They're united, and they are going to play a major role in Europe's destiny. He's going to be President for seven years.

For many years now the undisputed leader of Europe has been [German] Chancellor Kohl. I've spoken many times before this committee and elsewhere of the central importance of Germany in Europe, and Germany as America's most important continental partner. I stand by those descriptions, but I am very pleased to see the development of relations with France. I've also been privileged to be present at some of President Clinton's meetings with President Chirac. They have a good personal relationship, and I think that will develop.

On the arms embargo

I have been a long, public opponent of the arms embargo. It was a disgrace that we voted for it in 1991.

But be clear of the consequences of a vote: A vote for lifting the arms embargo is also a vote for the U.N.'s withdrawal, which is also a vote for the 25,000 troops to assist in the withdrawal. . . . A failure to support our NATO allies in a difficult withdrawal which they could not complete successfully without NATO would mean—and I use this term advisedly—the end of NATO. We are NATO. If the British, the French, the Dutch, the Danes, the Canadians—all of whom have had deaths in Bosnia, start a withdrawal and get into trouble and we don't come to their aid, I don't see how we can credibly say that we are NATO, that NATO has a future. . . . I do not think the dissolution of NATO is in America's national security interests. And I believe that our failure to support the British and French, if the U.N. withdraws, would mean the effective end of NATO.