

The Hot Seat: Reflections on Diplomacy from Stalin's Death to the Bali Bombing

By Richard Woolcott

Harper Collins Publishers 2003, 324 pages, ISBN 0 7322 7125 8

Reviewed by Myint Zan^[*]

As a student of international law, Richard Woolcott's book and especially the 'sub-title' which indicates a wide range in terms of events, duration and topics attract the reviewer's attention and interest. I was aware that as a career diplomat Woolcott witnessed some of the events that he narrated about 'first-hand'. Though it is expected that Woolcott's book would primarily be a personal memoir and his reflections would be from the perspective of a diplomat I still hope to learn from the book. The reviewer feels that only part of this expectation has been met and the main reason for this is the writing style of the author. There are at least about three dozen places in the book where this reviewer has made changes in terms of expressions or style in the margins of the pages. There are quite a few –indeed a fair bit of- paragraphs and sentences where the reviewer feels that the author could have written more clearly, concisely and effectively. Just to give a random example: before typing this particular sentence I randomly opened the book and the first sentence that I chance to read was as follows:

Strategically situated and host to major American naval and air bases at Subic Bay and Clarkfield, with at one time a larger economy than Malaysia and Singapore and with the second largest population in ASEAN –over fifty million when I started my posting as ambassador- the Philippines was in 1978 an important regional neighbour in which I believe that there would be real opportunities for Australia to expand its bilateral relations (page 175).

The sentence is grammatically correct but one feels that shorter and clearer sentences could have been employed for more effective communication. Indeed a grammatically dubious expression followed just one pager later in this paragraph:

I was offered the ambassadorship in Moscow but felt I had done my duty there and declined. I was then offered the position of high commissioner in Ottawa. There was more policy work there than in Moscow and I have always found our Canadian colleagues friendly and helpful, but I still felt that *I'd be being pushed aside* if I went to Ottawa. (page 176, emphasis added)

The phrase that appeared in italics above seemed to me grammatically dubious or at least stylistically infelicitous. But aside from that and the risk of being accused that I am 'nitpicking' about matters of style there are a few factual errors or questionable statements in the book. Writing about his second diplomatic stint in the then Soviet Union in the late 1950s (his first diplomatic stint being in the early 1950s) Richard Woolcott writes that the views of the then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev about the ' "two camps" theory in history, first put forwarded by Lenin' was 'largely shared by President Richard Nixon at that time' (pages 42-43). At that time (the period that Richard Woolcott was writing about) was about the year

1959 and Richard Nixon was not then President but the Vice-President of the United States of America.

As stated in the sub-title Woolcott begins his memoirs starting with his first diplomatic stint in the Soviet Union in August 1952 (page 4). Within seven months of his arrival to take up his first posting in Moscow Joseph Stalin died on 5 March 1953 . Walcott writes:

... the outpouring of public grief when Stalin's death was announced was remarkable ... a bearded Russian with no legs [who] had lost them during the war [and whose] body rested on a wheeled trolley ... looked up at me with a sadness in his eyes and tears streaming down his cheeks. Waving his arms he cried 'What are we going to do? What will happen to us now the great Joseph Vissarionovich has gone?' The man's mutilation and grief was such that I was lost for an answer. (page 12).

Liberal human rights advocates and at least some international lawyers would most probably have a generally very negative view of Stalin mainly due to the human rights violations he had caused to commit or had 'sponsored' during his 29 years rule of the then Soviet Union. Woolcott who witnessed first hand the Soviet public's reaction to the death of Stalin provides another glimpse of the impact or influence of this man whom some (mainly in the West) have ranked the same with Hitler if not worse. They apparently based their views in terms of the deaths these two tyrants had perceived to have caused internally within the countries in which they had ruled. One should not accused Walcott of being 'a leftie' (though he did acknowledge that 'at the tender age of seventeen he had purchased the Communist Manifesto at the Left Bookshop in Geelong, and had read it', page 5) when he writes that

It is impossible to evaluate Stalin adequately in a few words. While he has been demonised in the West and denounced in Russia itself because of the purges in the 1930s and his cruelty, his achievements are remarkable despite the human cost. He is credited with ensuring that the revolution succeeded, driving the Soviet Union out of its backwardness, and with organising the heroic defence of the country against Germany. (page 12)

Notwithstanding the fact that what Woolcott writes is to some extent true many persons especially from those of the political right – though not necessarily only persons with such political inclinations- may still think that Woolcott is, if not a political 'leftie', then he praises Stalin's legacy just a tad than it warrants. But Woolcott's comments on the status and legacy of Suharto's rule of Indonesia and especially in relation to the occupation and annexation of East Timor will not go well not only with leftists but even with many liberals (liberals with a 'small l') and independent observers. (It is realised that from a global political perspective Suharto was much less influential and - though these things are hard to 'weigh' or evaluate- some what less brutal than Stalin.) Walcott's analysis of 'The Tragedies of East Timor' (name of the Chapter in the book) can be fairly described as 'defensive'. It is defensive of the Suharto's government's actions in 1975 when it, in flagrant violation of international law, invaded and annexed East Timor. It is even more defensive of the succession of Australian governments' acquiescence in if not support for this unlawful act. Walcott rightly points out that '[t]he analogy between Indonesia's invasion of East Timor and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is not sustainable' (page 155). He is even legalistic (in the complimentary sense of the words) when he writes that '[i]n the case of Kuwait, a sovereign member of the United Nations recognised by Iraq was invaded by Iraq in one of the most clear cut cases of aggression in recent history' (pages 155-56). One agrees with Walcott that the analogy if not putting a virtual (legal) equation between Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975 is strained. The implicit comparison which Walcott makes or infers between China's intention to 'absorb Macao' (page 149) and Indonesia's actions in East Timor may not be as strained an 'equation' or analogy

as that between annexations of Kuwait (1990) and East Timor (1975). Still, such a comparison is tantamount to ignoring the contrasts in the historical relations, geographical and cultural ties (or lack of ties) and also perhaps the legal dimensions concerning the relationship vis-à-vis China and Macao and Indonesia and East Timor. And one cannot but feel that the author of *The Hot Seat* tries to downplay the atrocities committed during the early years of the Suharto era (post 30 September 1965 after the failed 'Communist coup') which resulted in the deaths of up to half a million 'Communist' Indonesians. Those hostile to or critical of Suharto and the then Indonesian government's actions in East Timor, Walcott avers, are 'angry persons on the political left who have never forgiven Suharto for the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party in 1965 and 1966 after the attempted coup and removal of Sukarno' (page 155).

One submits that it is not merely or even mainly the destruction of the Indonesian Communist Party that needs to be remembered if not recorded as one of Suharto's and the 'New Order's' regime regretful if not condemnable legacies. It is the atrocities and killings of about half-a million Indonesians (alleged Communists or otherwise) in about eighteen months during and after 'The Year of Living Dangerously' that engender the legitimate concern and justifiable outrage by some (and not merely those from the 'political left') against Suharto and his regime. These atrocities can at least generically if not legalistically be described as crimes against humanity. The colonisation – one realises that this is an emotive term but one should not forget that colonies can be made not only by European or 'white' powers in this day and age of post (or should one say) neo-colonialism- of East Timor by Indonesia and the massacres that took place at least during the initial phase of the Indonesia invasion and annexation seems to have been 'papered over' in Wolcott's analysis of 'The Tragedies of East Timor'. It is also noteworthy that Walcott seems to de-emphasise the early condemnation of the East Timor annexation in both the Security Council and the General Assembly of the United Nations. His analysis is based mainly on Australia's or what is perceived to be Australia's national interest viewed through the lens of a diplomat and the various political elites from Canberra. It fails to convince this student of international law that Indonesia's (and subsequently) Australian political and diplomatic elites' actions in and regarding East Timor especially from the time of the invasion to the East Timor referendum are legally justifiable or defensible. Taken into account the realities of international relations and power politics, one has to concede though that it is 'understandable' that Australia had acted the way it did.

Talking about realities of power politics and international relations Woolcott's recount of the vote in the United Nations General Assembly on 2 November 1983 regarding the resolution 'condemning the US invasion' of Grenada several days earlier in late October 1983 is of interest. (Here there is yet another factual or typographical error instead of writing 'Grenada resolution' it was erroneously written as 'Nicaraguan resolution' [sic], page 198). After recounting the tensions and factions (so to speak) within the Australian delegation in the UN General Assembly as to how to vote Woolcott as head of the delegation 'voted for the resolution as a whole'. Woolcott recounts though that when a separate vote deploring -in fact Woolcott, in an earlier description of the resolution actually uses the word 'condemn' though taken diplomatic niceties into account one surmises that in the actual resolution the word 'deplore' rather than 'condemn' would probably have been used- 'the invasion of Grenada as violation of international law, I cast an abstension' (page 199). It is somewhat heartening to read that Woolcott rejected the advice of the political counsellor of his delegation that Australia 'should not vote against our ally even if its actions were highly questionable'. Woolcott recounts that the same person with the support of another officer who happens to be his eldest son Peter argued that '[n]o Soviet ally had voted against the Soviet Union when it had invaded Afghanistan'. The response of Woolcott to this argument for 'solidarity' with the United States is instructive:

I said Soviet allies were in fact Soviet satellites. Australia was not. We sought to pursue an independent foreign policy within the framework of the alliance. Moreover, the United States had not consulted us or informed us in advance of its

proposed military intervention. If it had, I believe, we would have counselled against it. (page 199).

Reading of what happened in the United Nations General Assembly in the year 1983 regarding the 'Grenada invasion' one cannot help but 'fast forward' nearly twenty years into the future : the March 2003 Iraq war lodged by the United States with the help of the (so-called) 'coalition of the willing' which at least initially consisted of only Great Britain and Australia. Even the most partisan leftist or those who opposed the 2003 Iraq invasion would perhaps not term the Howard government's collusion with the United States 'demoted' the Howard government to the status of a 'satellite' of Old Glory. The question that still arises though is: compared with twenty years earlier has Australia under the Howard government become somewhat less independent in its (to quote Woolcott's words) 'foreign policy within the frame work of the alliance'?

A curiosity arises as to what this veteran diplomat would have said vis-à-vis the Iraq war. (Woolcott's book was published just before the 2003 invasion of Iraq.) In this regard, the author of *The Hot Seat* gives more than a hint albeit a brief one when he writes that '[w]hile it was relatively straight forward for Australia to support American policies against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, unqualified support for an indefinite war on terrorism and a possible war against Iraq poses new difficulties for us ... Allies will need to be watchful lest they should be drawn into a protracted war on Iraq or terrorism in one form or another related [merely] to American interests and domestic politics'. And again in a perceptive as well as prophetic statement Woolcott reminds us that '[a]n all-powerful America may become more self-righteous and unilateralist in the future' (page 301). It needs to be mentioned that these words were written post-'September 11' and before the Iraq war broke out. Coming from a seasoned diplomat who have Australia's self-interest rather than full adherence to the 'niceties' of international law as a paramount goal these words should provide food for thought for current and future Australian governmental elites.

Richard Woolcott is modest about his role and contribution in his 'creation' to which he was 'pleased to have been present' (pages 244, 304) and establishment of APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum)— or at least its first meeting 'which took place in Canberra' in November 1989 (page 232). Woolcott writes that 'APEC would have more chance of success if it was promoted by a country like Australia, which was neither a major power nor economically dominant' (page 241). This observation is reinforced in the next Chapter 'America Pre-eminent' and he highlights the fact that for Australians 'it has always been how to maximise our importance to and our influence on our much larger, more powerful and self-centred ally' (page 247).

Two of the best sections of the book are the concluding Chapters on 'Reflections on Diplomacy' and 'Advance Australia Where?'. Needless to say the reviewer's positive note in this regard is attributable to the fact that he generally, indeed largely, agrees with the sentiments and views expressed in those Chapters as well as those in the 'Epilogue'. In virtually the last page of the book Richard Woolcott writes apparently with considerable feeling about the 'four goals' Australia should strive to achieve 'early in the twenty-first century'. According to Walcott they should include 'reconciliation between immigrant Australians and the indigenous peoples they dispossessed'. At its third goal (after the second one of successfully consolidating 'a fair, tolerant, multiethnic, multicultural Australian democracy') Woolcott speaks rather whimsically about 'the creation of a proud, distinctly Australian republic, with its own head of state that has severed anachronistic links with the English monarchy' (page 305). Earlier, he 'reveals' that as early as the year 1953, at the time of Queen Elizabeth's coronation in his 'first Moscow days' he was 'a republican and [was] uncomfortable with the idea of Elizabeth II becoming Queen of Australia' (page 11).

The 'charm' of the book consists of such personal glimpses and stories (highlighted especially at the end of most Chapters under the title 'My Diplomatic Notebook'). This 'charm' or (generally successful) attempts at humour can also be counted as yet another 'positive' of the book. But it bears repeating that at times, the author's somewhat stilted and convoluted style detracts from its narration, substantive themes and discussions.

The reviewer has said (admitted, if you will) earlier that he reads the book partly through the 'lens' of a student of international law. A student of international law should, perchance or peradventure, attempt to read the allied subjects of diplomacy, international relations and political science written by diplomats who though not fully academic international lawyers would invariably have an international law background. Among such books this reviewer has had the chance to read were *The New Diplomacy: International Affairs in the Modern Age* by the late Abba Eban (first published in 1983) and *Unvanquished: A US-UN Saga* by Boutros Boutros-Ghali^[1] (first published in 1999). I should say that academically and in terms of reading pleasure too I have learned and profited more from the above two books which I have had the chance to read in their earlier years of publication. Still, scholars and students of international law, international relations and political science especially those with an interest in Australia's role in the Asia-Pacific region should find Richard Woolcott's personal memoirs and reflections on diplomacy in *The Hot Seat* to be generally an enjoyable read.

[*] Lecturer
School of Law
University of the South Pacific
Port Vila
Vanuatu

[1] For this reviewer's review of *Unvanquished* see Book Review, (2000) 27 *Journal of Malaysian and Comparative Law*, 313-26.

© University of the South Pacific 1998-2006