

## **America and Bosnia**

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*Abstract: American intervention in the conflict between Serbia and Bosnia stems from interests in European order, and not from preserving a world order, or from denouncing military aggression. The expected but undesirable focus on Europe is the outcome of radically altered power equations after the end of the Cold War. Pres Bill Clinton should refuse to be swayed by powerful vested interests and commit his policies to achieving peace in the region on the basis of a territorial arrangement.*

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THE WAR IN Bosnia has occasioned the first significant debate over foreign policy of the post cold war period. It has thereby done what the war against Iraq did not do. The short-lived debate that attended armed intervention in the Persian Gulf resembled in most respects the debate attending armed intervention in the last decade or so of the Cold War. All that was missing was the Cold War itself, and thus the risk of armed conflict with the Soviet Union. In Congress, an interventionist Republican party was pitted against a non-interventionist Democratic party. In the broader public debate, those urging war against Iraq were those who had supported armed intervention on earlier occasions, while those who opposed going to war were those who had opposed resorting to force on these same occasions.

In the case of Bosnia, the identity of the participants has changed. In Congress the debate over whether to pursue an interventionist course has not followed party lines. The Democrats can no longer be identified with an anti-interventionist position. The same is true of a number of public figures who had once been reliably anti-interventionist. Indeed, some of the most insistent criticism of both the Bush and Clinton administrations for failing to give military support to the Bosnian Muslims has come from those whose anti-interventionist disposition had long been taken for granted. Thus what Senator Joseph Biden has come to symbolize for the liberal democrats in Congress, Anthony Lewis has come to symbolize for liberal expression in the media.

The debate over America's course in the Balkans has also aroused the emotions and passions of participants in a way the earlier debate over war in the Gulf did not. There is an intensity of feeling over Bosnia that was not apparent over Kuwait. It may be seen in the heightened rhetoric that has become almost commonplace among critics of the American government's "failure" to date to come to the aid of Bosnia's beleaguered Muslims. For this failure, Leslie Gelb has written, "Bosnian Muslims will pay with their lives, and Americans with their faith." The loss of our soul, it is argued, will be matched by the sacrifice of the nation's vital interests. Albert Wohlstetter has found in our recent

record in the Balkans "the worst performance of the democracies since World War II and the most dangerous." One must go back to the debate over Vietnam to find statements of comparable intensity.

Although the war in Bosnia has aroused such strong emotions and passions, it has not evoked comparable appeals for the sacrifice of blood and treasure. With very few exceptions, those who have called for American intervention have been careful to emphasize the quite modest costs they are willing to pay in intervening. While insistent that the interests at stake in Bosnia are very great, they are equally insistent that these interests be secured at modest cost.

The debate over Bosnia has thus been marked by a disjunction between interests avowed and costs rejected. It has also been marked by a view of the war's origins that must yield a distorted picture of the interests that are at stake. The conflict is not, as it has been so often depicted, a conventional case of aggression by one state (Serbia) against another (Bosnia). The insistence upon seeing its origins in these terms must distort its true nature, obscure the objectives of an intervention, and lead to a view of the interests at stake in the war that is misleading and unpersuasive. It is not the repelling of aggression as such, nor the maintenance of that ill-defined abstraction known as "world order," that constitute the interests at stake in Bosnia. Neither is it the need to appease a Muslim world that, in the absence of western intervention in Bosnia, stands ready to succor Bosnia's Muslims. The great interest at stake in Bosnia is neither more nor less than order and stability in post-Cold War Europe. If a persuasive case cannot be made on these grounds, it probably cannot be made at all.

### **Origins and Interpretations**

DESPITE THE complex and tangled history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the origins of the war in that republic of Yugoslavia proceeded from causes that were not inordinately complex. The true cause of the war was the structure of reciprocal fears that existed within Bosnia on the eve of the conflict. Each group feared domination by others, and not unreasonably so. For the Muslims, the prior secession of Croatia and Slovenia had left them, in effect, as members of a Greater Serbia, and they not unnaturally feared that their interests would suffer badly in a rump Yugoslavia dominated by the Serbs. In such an eventuality, the repressive acts that the Serbs had committed in Kosovo might be duplicated in Bosnia; and independence appeared as the only escape from this fearful prospect. The Serbs reasoned in essentially the same way. As part of Yugoslavia, their interests would be secure; as a minority in a unitary Bosnian state dominated by the Muslims, they foresaw a repetition, at best, of the discrimination they had suffered in Kosovo when its status was elevated in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution--and, at worst,

of the horrors they had suffered during World War II when Bosnia formed part of the Nazi supported Croatian Ustasha state.

The Croatians, for their part, wanted out of Yugoslavia for the same reason that the Muslims did, and wanted out of Bosnia for reasons not dissimilar to those of the Serbs. Their vote for independence in the March 1992 referendum, as Aleksa Djilas has observed, did not betoken support for a unitary Bosnian state; on the contrary, their exit from Yugoslavia was the means by which they might gain entry into newly independent Croatia.<sup>(1)</sup> Their attitude was an ominous portent, because it meant that a majority of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the best armed part at that, was opposed to the creation of this new state. The Serbs and Croats in Bosnia had the support of the two nationalities that had traditionally contended for dominance in Yugoslavia. From the beginning, it was evident that the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina could only be secured if it could muster large-scale support from the international community. There is nothing mysterious about the calculations of the three national groups. Each group nursed historic grievances, some more recent than others, but all of which were felt with passionate intensity. The utter incompatibility of their respective interests was such that war was far and away the most likely outcome of Bosnia's secession from Yugoslavia. Indeed, one needs hardly to invoke the notorious tribal hatreds and violent propensities of the Balkan peoples to account for the war, for secession has nearly always in history been attended with armed violence. It was so on the two occasions when it was attempted in our own experience as a nation (in 1776 and 1860). Daniel Webster's famous assertion in 1850--"Peaceful secession, Sir! Your eyes and mine are destined never to see that miracle"--stated a fact applicable not only to the American Union but to the normal experience of all states, which hardly allowed any other conclusion but that secession was and would ever be an act of war. The experience of the Soviet Union should not mislead us on this score, for the peaceful break-up of a state is far more the exception than the rule--a miracle, at odds with the normal course of events.

The origins of the Bosnian war are thus relatively simple. What is exceedingly complex is how the descent into savage fighting might have been averted; still more difficult is how the war, once started, might have been--and might yet be--stopped. That the policy which was adopted, in all its twists and turns, has been an utter failure is a point that need hardly be labored. The role played by the Western powers in attempting to put an end to the war has many critics but few defenders. The judgment that historians will reach about the diplomatic record of the past two years will doubtless be tempered by the sheer intractability of the problems that were faced, but that it will be a harsh one seems altogether likely.

In assessing the role played by the United States in attempting to put an end to the war, attention must first be drawn to the way in which the American government interpreted the origins of the conflict, for this interpretation dictated in critical respects its diplomatic posture. The American government's explanation stressed that the war was caused above all by Serbian aggression. The indictment rested fundamentally not on the violations of the laws of war that the Serbs have undoubtedly committed on a lavish scale, but on the decision to use force in the first place. In the U.S. view, the war itself was a crime. Although the Serbs' violations of *jus in bello* have been seen to confirm and compound their violation of *jus ad bellum*, the presumed existence of the aggression itself has played a decisive role in shaping the policy of the U.S. government. The assumption, moreover, that the war has been one of Serbian aggression has been generally accepted in the United States; the debate over intervention has not fundamentally turned over the existence of aggression against an internationally recognized state, but over the potential costs of U.S. military action to reverse it.

The validity of this widespread consensus rests primarily on the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina gained recognition as an independent state in early April 1992, and that all subsequent support which Belgrade provided to the Bosnian Serbs constituted an illegal intervention in Bosnia's internal affairs. Yet the manner in which independence was achieved and the manner in which recognition was accorded were themselves highly questionable. In holding a referendum on March 1, 1992, in which a majority voted to secede from Yugoslavia, Bosnia satisfied part of the criteria laid down by the European Community and the United States for achieving recognition (with the West also exacting from the Sarajevo government a declared respect for minority rights), but the referendum, boycotted by the Serbs, was itself a violation of the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution. That constitution, like its predecessors, had conferred a right of secession but made it dependent on the mutual agreement of the nations composing Yugoslavia. It was based, that is to say, on the notion of a concurrent majority of the constituent nations, not on simple majoritarianism; to move to secession without the consent of the Serbs was a plain violation of its terms.(2)

If the act of secession was illegal within the terms of the Yugoslav constitution, was it nevertheless legal from the standpoint of international law? Is it now, in other words, an accepted principle of international law that a majority of the population within a well defined province or constituent republic, if it so wishes, has a right to secede from an existing state? There is little to conclude that there is. No charter, treaty, or convention confers such a right, and for the reason that a great many states (and nearly all those of a multi-ethnic or -religious kind) would be incapable of maintaining themselves if such a right existed. References to the right of self-determination in documents such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights have not been understood as conferring a right of secession. Were the case otherwise, we would have the

inexplicable phenomenon that a large number of states had entered a suicide pact when they signed the covenant, and no known rule of legal interpretation would allow such an absurd construction.(3)

These considerations establish that the recognition of Bosnia's independence itself constituted an illegal intervention in Yugoslavia's internal affairs, to which Belgrade had every right to object. The contrary view may only be asserted on the debased view that international law is whatever the United States and the Security Council says it is and that we are free, like an Alice in the grip of deconstructionism, to have words mean anything we like. These considerations do not establish that Bosnia's Muslims had no justification for their secession, but rather that the justification, if it existed, must be based on grounds other than those of law (whether municipal or international). Appeal must be made, in other words, to the natural right of revolution. But as Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, this right is not an unqualified one: only a "long train of abuses & usurpations" can justify a decision to throw off established government.

Ironically, it has been the advocates of large-scale intervention, and indeed the Izetbegovic government itself, that have provided the most persuasive evidence that Jefferson's threshold was not met in the Bosnian case. For the picture that advocates of intervention have drawn of the almost idyllic relations that prevailed among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims before the war severely undercuts the view that the Muslims had suffered the degree of oppression necessary to justify the natural right of revolution. It would be more accurate to say that the Muslims had a reasonable anticipation that they would suffer such oppression if they remained within the rump Yugoslavia; they acted, that is to say, against "tyranny anticipated" rather than "tyranny inflicted" (just as, in fact, the American colonists had done). That anticipation could not but appear as utterly compelling to the majority of the Muslims; all that has happened since the war broke out confirms it. What should draw objection, however, is the assumption that whereas the Muslims had every reason to fear living in a state dominated by the Serbs, the Serbs had no reason to fear living in a state dominated by the Muslims. That assumption is fundamentally implausible; it is, nevertheless, the unspoken assumption of the American government's position and of the dominant consensus in the United States regarding the origins of the war.

### **Shifts and Reversals**

BEFORE CONSIDERING the consequences this American interpretation of the origins of the war had on the course of events in Bosnia, attention may first be drawn to the extremely awkward, and yet almost entirely unremarked, position in which it placed U.S. diplomacy. By the spring of 1992, our diplomacy was clearly directed toward the

breakup of Yugoslavian territorial integrity on the basis of plebiscitary majorities in each of its constituent republics. Having previously taken the position, as James Baker did in Belgrade in the summer of 1991, that the United States favored the preservation of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity, American diplomacy did a sharp turn and pronounced itself in favor of Yugoslavia's partition. Once this partition had taken place, however, we once again insisted that the territorial integrity of the new states was something sacred and inviolable. Having defiled the principle of territorial integrity, the American government immediately rediscovered it in all its purity. Thereafter, any suggestion that these new boundaries be changed was subsequently met by the insistence, in the exasperated voice of outraged virtue, that to do so challenged the very basis of world order.

The reasons for this last attitude are clear. The shift in American policy toward Yugoslavia took place immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Concerned primarily as they were with the potential for violence that this breakup might bring, and thinking of Russia as they considered Yugoslavia, American diplomatists searched for the means by which that potential might be mitigated. The parallels between the two situations, indeed, were eerily exact. Russia had her "famous twenty nine millions" outside the mother country; Serbia had a comparable percentage outside its borders. It seemed a sound approach to adopt the same policy toward both. Whatever the merits of this approach as applied to Russia, however, it was an unmitigated disaster as applied to Yugoslavia.

The new-found reverence for territorial integrity may well have played a crucial role in triggering the conflict in Bosnia. It is undoubtedly the case that the United States and the European Community encouraged the Izetbegovic government to hold the referendum on secession in the first place. It also appears to be true that the United States encouraged Izetbegovic to reject the EC-sponsored cantonization plan agreed upon in two separate meetings in late winter 1992.<sup>(4)</sup> Izetbegovic's repudiation of the second agreement on returning to Sarajevo was the immediate trigger for the war. Whether the Muslim leader repudiated this agreement because of pressure from militants at home, as Glenny has said, or because he understood America's advice to reject it as an implicit pledge of military support, remains unclear. Given the distribution of military power in Bosnia at the time, the only way to make sense of Izetbegovic's decision is to assume that he did believe that the United States would make good on his military inferiority; the support Izetbegovic received from the United States to oppose cantonization may well have given him the confidence to take this fateful step. Certainly, the mournful voices coming out of Sarajevo once the war broke out attest to a sense of deep betrayal on the part of the Muslims.

The war may have occurred in any event. The Lisbon formula was vague in crucial respects, and contained no agreement respecting the boundaries of the three cantons. Extremists on all sides were certain to raise formidable objections to it. Whatever weight its rejection is assigned in bringing on the war, however, cannot detract from the judgment that American diplomats acted in an extremely irresponsible manner if, as reported, they advised Izetbegovic to reject the Lisbon formula. If war was to be averted, an agreement respecting cantonization was the last step at which it might have been. That the United States both encouraged the Muslims to take the steps that led toward war, and then subsequently abandoned them once the war broke out, is a damning indictment of American diplomacy--and one, moreover, that is likely to receive the assent of virtually all sides in the debate over intervention. Either we should not have encouraged them or we should not have abandoned them; it is difficult to think of a plausible defense for having done both.

Once fighting started, the understanding of the war that attributed it fundamentally to Serbian aggression had an equally bad effect on the diplomatic posture the United States adopted towards settling it. The passions and hatreds unleashed by the war were such that territorial partition almost immediately became the only basis on which a compromise settlement might be reached. Yet the United States consistently opposed all such proposals. A compromise settlement was ruled out by the terms of the UN resolution passed in late May 1992, under American prompting, which called for the disarmament of all irregular forces and the withdrawal of the Yugoslav federal army (JNA) from Bosnian territory. Only one reading of these resolutions was possible, and this was that they required as a condition for lifting the sanctions imposed on Serbia the establishment of the police power by the Sarajevo government over the whole territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>(5)</sup> Thereafter, the Bush administration opposed the interest expressed by London and Paris in a territorial partition before the August 1992 London conference. The incoming Clinton administration's opposition to the Vance-Owen plan was of a piece with this policy. The American interpretation of the war as one of Serbian aggression has made any compromise settlement vulnerable to the charge of rewarding aggression. As such, it precluded a negotiated settlement, and made it inevitable that the war would be decided by sheer military power.

The effects of this interpretation of the war on Serbia are also deserving of note. The reaction of Milosevic to the full court press he confronted from the United States and the international community was to abandon formally the claim of a Greater Serbia, while keeping it up in fact. In the hope, apparently, of avoiding UN sanctions, Serbia and Montenegro accordingly established a new state of Yugoslavia and simultaneously recognized the independence of Croatia and Bosnia. The JNA was formally withdrawn from Bosnian territory while at the same time its weapons, stores of ammunition, and

most of its men passed to the control of the Republika Srpska. These maneuvers had about them a farcical character. It was easily documented that Serbia continued to give support to the Bosnian Serbs; denials of this fact by Milosevic only confirmed his reputation as a liar. He was forced into this absurd position by the attitude taken by the international community, which stood foursquare behind the claim that Bosnia's secession was legal and that Yugoslavia had no right to prevent it by force. The effect, however, on the conduct of the war was pernicious. However bad the JNA's record had been in the Croatian war and in the beginning stages of the war in Bosnia, it had a better record than that of the Serbian irregular forces; to disband it was to invite an increase in the number of vile atrocities that have distinguished the war's conduct. This decision also weakened the link between Belgrade and the Bosnian Serbs, and made it more difficult for Milosevic to apply the kind of pressure on them necessary to reach a settlement.

Perhaps the most paradoxical effect that this understanding of the origins of the war had was on the prospect that the United States or the international community might use force to limit Serb territorial claims. For one thing, it made it much more difficult to reach a consensus either at the United Nations or within the Western alliance on the possible limited use of force. Given the objectives that flowed directly from the definition of the conflict as unadulterated Serbian aggression, it was evident that any limited use of force would leave unsatisfied the larger objective of "restoring" Bosnian territorial integrity, and that after the first drink, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, it would be necessary to take another. If the objective were the disarmament of Serbian militias throughout Bosnia, it was a moral certainty that the Serbs would resist this through force, and that the objective could only be achieved through a major war. Just as the Americans were capable of vetoing diplomatic measures that pointed toward partition, the Europeans (and Russia) were capable of vetoing steps that pointed toward such a war. The end result, of course, was a stalemate at the UN and within the Alliance in which fervid denunciations of the war were paired with measures that held out no prospect of ending it on terms conformable to those laid out in UN resolutions.

The skepticism of the U.S. military toward any intervention in Bosnia was reinforced by the same considerations. By virtue of the overly ambitious objectives that the American understanding of the conflict entailed, every proposal to use limited force was highly vulnerable to the objection that it would not satisfy the aims American diplomacy had laid down. For the limited use of force, when paired with these highly ambitious goals, would have succeeded in ensuring precisely the kind of objective that the diplomatists had deemed totally unacceptable. There was no plausible end game in this scenario. Escalation was written all over it. Even had the JCS been willing to swallow its understandable reservations toward any kind of military involvement in the Balkans, it would not and could not digest the proposition that U.S. military forces be

committed in a way that left a huge gap between the military means proposed and the political ends embraced.

### **"Lift and Strike "**

IN THE DEBATE over intervention, the principal alternative to the course followed by western policy in the past year has come to be known as "lift and strike"--lifting the arms embargo against the Sarajevo government and striking Serbian forces with American airpower. There have been variations in the views of the numerous adherents to this approach, with some suggesting that Serbia proper be bombed immediately and others insisting that the first step ought to be targeting gun emplacements surrounding Sarajevo, while the threat of escalation to Serbia is held in reserve. Whatever their overall merits, the various options recommended for the use of airpower have been relatively clear; this is not true, however, of the "lift" portion of the strategy. How and where the training of Bosnian Muslims would take place, who would supply the arms, their method of delivery into Bosnia--these and other questions, however critical, have remained generally obscure. This is true not only of most commentaries in the media but also of the Clinton administration itself. The Clinton plan called for air strikes in Bosnia proper and neither disavowed nor threatened further aerial escalation. What it intended to do beyond lifting the legal prohibition at the UN on shipments of arms to the Muslims, however, remained unclear.

Whether this initiative, the culmination of months of indecision on the part of the incoming administration, was seriously meant cannot be known with assurance. The deliberate manner in which the decision was reached, the pallid message that Warren Christopher delivered on his "consultations" with European allies, did not bespeak great conviction. It had the air of a proposition uttered in an academic seminar, an opinion among conversationalists in the liberal arts, that was to be weighed, sifted, analyzed, amended, and indeed perhaps rejected if sufficiently serious flaws (admitted, of course, to exist) might be found in it. Clinton's tactics resembled more than a little those employed by Eisenhower during the Dien Bien Phu crisis of 1954, when the president used the search for a consensus in Congress and among the allies as the means of killing a plan of military intervention. Clinton appears to have followed a similar tack in the Bosnian crisis, and may indeed (as a careful student of Vietnam) have had the Eisenhower precedent in mind.

The mysteries associated with this initiative are not exhausted by whether it was seriously meant by Mr. Clinton. The most peculiar feature of "lift and strike" was the disparity between the limited means that were proposed and the stakes presumed to exist. This disparity has characterized most American commentary on the crisis. Advocates of intervention have nearly always combined a description of the crisis that

recalled the 1930s with a fastidious aversion to the use of American ground forces that recalled the 1970s. If this aggression of the Serbs approached, in sheer evil, the worst crime of the century, a rather more robust conclusion than "lift and strike" would seem inexorably to follow. Yet, for nearly all commentators, and for the Clinton administration itself, it did not follow.

In assessing the plausibility of "lift and strike," it is necessary to recur again to the objectives to which this two-pronged strategy would have been married. The plan, or something like it, had been promised to the Muslims in exchange for their grudging support of the Vance-Owen plan; the attempt to change the balance of forces on the ground in Bosnia might therefore plausibly be read as an attempt to provide the Sarajevo government with sufficient military leverage to obtain an approximation of the territorial lines that had been contemplated in that settlement. But since the Clinton administration had itself made clear on coming into office that it considered Vance Owen seriously defective, on the grounds that it rewarded aggression, and since the Izetbegovic government clearly adhered to the same opinion, it seems fair to infer that the plan of intervention, if such it can be called, anticipated a change in military possession well beyond that contemplated in the Vance-Owen plan. The larger political objective of "restoring" Bosnia's territorial integrity had not been formally abandoned, and there was strong U.S. support for arraigining Serb leaders in war crimes trials. As the main precedents for such action were the war crimes trials after World War II, which were only made possible because of the complete defeat and occupation of Germany and Japan, it was not implausible to give a rather expansive reading to the war aims the United States might pursue.

How far these objectives would have reached is unclear; what is clear is that the Serbs would have seen this intervention as being highly injurious to their vital interests and would have fought it tenaciously. This may appear a less than surprising conclusion, but it had several important implications. That many of the arms would have to pass through Croatia (which had by this time repudiated its former uneasy alliance with the Muslims) was perhaps the least of the difficulties. Of greater importance was that whatever areas chosen for the receipt of arms and for training would have become highly significant military targets. The plan would have ensured that enemy forces (probably the Croats as well as the Serbs) had a vital interest in attacking, and no interest in respecting, any safe haven in central Bosnia. Given their military dominance, a race would likely have set in between the ability of the Serbs to render these areas militarily untenable and the ability of the U.S. to prevent this result. It was almost wholly implausible to believe that this result might be achieved with airpower alone. Yet the use of U.S. ground forces to prevent this result, not only in the Clinton plan but in most such plans, was precluded.

The situation would have produced strong pressures on the United States to escalate the air war. Attacks on Serbia itself, which a large number of the advocates of intervention (though not the Clinton administration itself) had always advocated, would almost inevitably have followed. Whether these attacks would have reached Belgrade's infrastructure, as some proposed, is unclear; that this was seriously suggested is a depressing commentary on the expedients to which the mismatch between our high objectives and our unwillingness to expose American forces seems regularly to lead. It does seem clear, in any case, that carrying the air war into Serbia would not have ended the conflict, and that its only effective function would have been to punish the Serbs. Taken together with the stated aims of policy, "lift and strike" promised nothing so much as a further enlargement of the doughnut of Lebanonization, narrowing the inner circle and extending the outer one, at potentially grave cost to our real interest in European order.

### **What is at Stake?**

IT IS A STRIKING feature of the debate over the Balkan war that the critically important issue of interest has only seldom been seriously addressed. When interest has not simply been denied or subordinated to humanitarian claims, it has more often than not been invoked in terms of universal principle. Thus it has been contended by many urging America's intervention in the conflict that the vital national interest at stake in Bosnia is nothing less than world order. On this view, the principle forbidding aggression is the very basis of world order and it requires that Serbia's aggression against Bosnia be repelled. The debate over interest has been carried on between those entertaining radically opposed positions, between those who find very little at stake and those who find almost everything at stake, between those who do not see beyond Bosnia and those who soar over the Balkans and Europe and see the world. As a result, the critical middle ground of interest, Europe, has been neglected.

The inadequacy with which interest has been considered in the debate over Bosnia is equally apparent in the unfolding of American policy. While the Bush Administration did consistently oppose any partition of Bosnia, it made very little effort to clarify the interests at stake in supporting Bosnia's territorial integrity. A policy of encouraging the Muslims to resist any kind of feasible settlement with the Serbs, which necessitated accepting a partition of some sort, was attended by the refusal either to give the Muslims any active military support or even to assist them in obtaining arms from abroad by ending the UN embargo on arms.

The Clinton administration came to office highly critical of its predecessor's record, particularly the Bush Administration's failure to work toward lifting the arms embargo. It did not appear to come to office with a clearer view of the nation's interests in the

Balkan war. Mr. Clinton's view of the conflict had always been marked by a certain confusion. Intent as a candidate on helping the Bosnians, he was also determined that we must not get involved in the quagmire. This insistence that help must be given but involvement avoided has persisted. On the eve of deciding upon the pursuit of a "lift and strike" policy in Bosnia, in the spring of 1993, Mr. Clinton was still determined that "The United States is not, should not, become involved as a partisan in a war."

Given this insistence upon altering the course of the conflict while standing aside from it, of becoming involved while remaining withdrawn, the president's failure to articulate the nation's interests consistently and persuasively in the Balkan conflict is not surprising. Occasionally, Mr. Clinton has insisted that our interest is strictly humanitarian. Taken by itself, however, it has never been clear why this should constitute an interest sufficient to justify American intervention, for if this is the basis the number of cases in which it ought to be applied is very large indeed.

On only one public occasion has the president given a considered statement of the interests at stake in the Balkan conflict. Speaking before a World Bank conference on May 7, 1993, Mr. Clinton declared:

The Serbs' actions over the past year violate the principle that internationally recognized borders must not be violated or altered by aggression from without. Their actions threaten to widen the conflict and foster instability in other parts of Europe in ways that could be exceedingly damaging. And their savage and cynical ethnic cleansing offends the world's conscience and our standards of behavior.

It does not help in assessing the administration's position that this statement has since been contradicted, and on more than one occasion, by Mr. Clinton's secretary of state. While the president in the above quoted address stated that the nation does have "fundamental interests" at stake in the Bosnian conflict, his secretary of state has declared that the war "does not involve our vital interests." The war in Bosnia, Mr. Warren Christopher has explained, involves our "humanitarian concerns" only, not our strategic interests. Indeed, having decided to distance themselves from the war as a result of their failure to persuade the European allies to support a "lift and strike" policy, both the president and the secretary of state began to characterize Bosnia as a civil rather than an international conflict. The change, though not consistently adhered to, was indicative of what may yet prove to be the complete abandonment of a position to which the president had so recently appeared firmly committed.

Mr. Clinton may always reclaim the position he took in May. Having changed his position in the past, he may change it again. If he does, it will be to embrace a view that was flawed then and remains flawed today. It will not do to identify America's interest

in the Balkan conflict primarily with the prevention of aggression. It will not do if only because the war did not arise as a simple case of aggression and the endless repetition that it did will neither make it true nor persuade a skeptical public. Even if that view of the origins did gain more acceptance than might reasonably be expected, it still could not be counted on to support the anticipated costs of military intervention. It did not do so in the Persian Gulf, where the interest in oil was clear and compelling, and it would not do so in Bosnia. Nor would humanitarian concerns succeed where a world order interest had failed.

If there is a vital American interest at stake in the Balkan war, it is to be found not in world order but in European order. The great issue of foreign policy Bosnia has raised--or at least should have raised--is that of our interest and role in Europe, now that the Cold War is over. Earlier circumstances were such as to make our interest apparent and compelling. A Soviet dominated Europe, it was believed, would seriously endanger the security and independence of the United States. It would do so by virtue of the immense resources that a Soviet-dominated Europe would place at the disposal of a state that insisted on seeing us as their enemy. Beyond these considerations, the American interest in Europe extended to the preservation of a political and economic order in which free institutions would flourish.

All this ensured that whatever the differences we had with our European allies--whether over extra-European issues, over burdensharing, over strategy for meeting the Soviet threat, or even over what constituted the requisite degree of loyalty to the alliance itself--would be overcome by the need that each side of the Atlantic had for the other. In the phrase that was often used to characterize the transatlantic relationship, Europe and the United States shared a "community of fate," and although the phrase surely overstated the nature of the bonds between the two sides of the Atlantic, it also expressed a profound truth about a relationship of mutual dependency that did exist. It may be recalled that only a decade ago, during the Euromissile crisis, this truth was put to the test in circumstances that were seen by many American and Europeans alike as heralding a serious crisis in the alliance, even perhaps eventuating in its breakup. But the institution that was judged at the time by not a few expert observers as having become an "empty shell" survived and went on to play a significant role in the concluding chapter of the cold war.

It is a measure of the distance we have come in the very few years since the end of the Cold War that an American secretary of state can refer to a war that may well have serious consequences for Europe's stability as "a humanitarian crisis a long way from home, in the middle of another continent." It is perhaps a still more striking indication of the change in the relationship that formed the principal pillar of the post World War II order that Mr. Christopher can characterize America's role to date in the Balkan

conflict as "proportionate to what our responsibilities are" and to insist that "we can't do it all." These statements, taken together with a corresponding pattern of behavior, raise the question: is Bosnia a portent of a readiness to abandon a once Eurocentric policy? And if it is, what is the rationale for so momentous a change? Mr. Christopher has said, and the president apparently agrees, that the Balkan war is primarily a European problem. But the evidence is abundant that it is a European problem that has already had a damaging impact on the credibility and integrity of the western alliance. It is also clear that the image of the European Community has suffered greatly from its failure to resolve satisfactorily the war being fought on its doorstep. Nor is it only the collective impotence of the Community that must cause concern, for the Balkan war has prompted the leading states of Europe to pursue separate and often conflicting policies toward the war in a manner reminiscent of a past that few wish to see revived.

Is an American government now to remain largely indifferent to these and other consequences of a failure to deal effectively and satisfactorily with the Balkan conflict? To respond that the conflict is primarily a European problem is to acknowledge that the possible consequences of failure do not engage our interest or, at any rate, do not engage our interest sufficiently to warrant committing ourselves militarily in a manner the American government has so far refused to do. But if this is the case, then a momentous change has indeed occurred in the nation's foreign policy. It has occurred not because our resources are limited and we cannot impose our will everywhere, all of which is certainly true, but because we have determined, consciously or unconsciously, that what was once our most vital interest no longer merits even the modest commitment (modest by former standards of the cold war) that Bosnia might require. It no longer merits this commitment, not because the Europeans could themselves satisfactorily resolve the problems of Bosnia if they had sufficient will to do so, which is assuredly the case, but because we no longer have the interest to do so. We are playing a game with Europe that we have played before. During the cold war, that game was always won by Europe, since the American interest in the security and independence of Europe in the end assured Europe of victory. The game has apparently changed, however, and Europe may now become the loser.

Europe would become the loser at a critical juncture in its history. In the wake of a bad outcome in the Balkans, one that left the door open to a wider conflict in southeastern Europe and that was productive of still greater disarray in the alliance, European stability would be put at risk. In the recriminations that would inevitably ensue, the United States could not be expected to withdraw entirely its military presence from Europe but its commitment to Europe would almost assuredly be weakened. So too, the EC would be further weakened. Having failed to act cooperatively and effectively, the major European states could be expected to fashion their own separate policies to deal with future instability in eastern and southeastern Europe. In these circumstances, the great problem of order in a post-Cold War Europe would almost surely be exacerbated.

That problem, at the heart of which is the question of how to accommodate German power with the least amount of tension and instability, has yet to be squarely addressed. It cannot be postponed indefinitely. Eventually, the most powerful state in Europe will entertain pretensions to a role and status commensurate with its power. In doing so, it is bound to stimulate the suspicions and unease of a continent that has not forgotten the past. In the absence of the United States, and of a still credible American military presence, how would Europe deal with the problem of German power? Simply to pose the question is tantamount to articulating the principal reason for maintaining the substance of the American relationship of the past half century with Europe. The withdrawal of America's power from and commitment to Europe would leave Germany dominant yet insecure. Indeed, its very dominance might well prove to be the principal source of its insecurity, for it could not fail to sense the fears others would entertain of its dominant role. A familiar cycle might set in, one that in the past has all too often resulted in an expansionist policy. That in this instance the expansion would take an economic rather than a military expression would not thereby render its consequences harmless. The fears of others might still prove strong enough to generate a rising instability and to deal a setback to European cooperation from which it would not recover.

It is difficult to believe that the American government is now indifferent to these prospects or that it is unmindful of the need to fit German power into a European order in which the constraints of the cold war are no more. The balancing of German power and the reassurance of Germany's neighbors cannot be done without the continued commitment (and presence) of American power--a power that in the course of balancing German power would also serve to reconcile Europe to that power. Whether the United States is capable of playing this role may well be questioned. It is not one particularly congenial to the nation's diplomatic traditions. Nor does it accord with America's post World War II experience in Europe. That the nation would have to play this complex and difficult role at a time when its power in Europe will in any event be declining can only add to the difficulty of the task. Still, this is the task that will have to be addressed if America's interest in a stable European order is to be maintained. Yet it is this interest that the Administration's response to the conflict in the Balkans has placed in question. That response must raise profound doubt about America's continued willingness and ability to remain the ultimate guarantor of order in post-Cold War Europe.

It is painfully clear that the war in Bosnia provides an inauspicious occasion for reaffirming the continuity of the American interest in Europe. The circumstances attending any American intervention in Bosnia are such as to hold out the real possibility of failure, one that could prove disastrous for America's presence and future role in Europe. But passivity must also entail a price, and it is likely to be very high. Had American governments never deigned to take serious note of Bosnia, the risks of

inaction might have been kept modest. This was not the course that was taken, however, and now the consequences of our previous actions must be faced.

### **The End Game**

THE GREAT DEFECT of American policy toward Bosnia has stemmed from the disjunction between ends that were overly ambitious and means that were plainly inadequate to the stated objectives. The alternative to the policy that was followed would have been to combine an insistence on limited ends with a determination to employ forcible means. An armed mediation conducted on the basis of a territorial partition would have had several advantages over the course which was followed. By tying the threatened use of force against the Serbs to limited territorial objectives, it would have offered the Serbs terms that, though falling well short of their maximal territorial aims, would nevertheless have respected their vital interests and provided them with a strong incentive toward reaching a compromise settlement. At the same time, it would have made clear at the outset to the Muslims that Western support was conditional upon their acceptance of the principle of partition, instead of encouraging the delusion--for delusion it was--that outside intervention would achieve their dream of establishing a unitary Bosnian state. Finally, had the American position been framed in these terms, it would have provided the basis for a unified and credible NATO strategy.

Whether the general elements of such a strategy can be reconstituted today may well be questioned. The disarray within the Western alliance, the contempt with which the Serbs have learned to treat Western threats of intervention, and the general deterioration of Muslim defenses have combined to produce a precarious situation on the ground. Nevertheless, there are changes in the American position that could make a real difference in the Bosnian end game, and that ought to be vigorously pursued.

The first is strong American support for the principle of territorial partition. No useful purpose is served at this late date by repeating the undoubted truth that partition sets a bad example and ought to be resisted wherever possible. For the more relevant truth is that it is the worst of solutions except when it is the only one. Given the ferocity of the fighting that has occurred, it is against nature to expect that the three nations can restore at any time in the near future the decent relations that once existed among them. With few exceptions, they cannot live side-by-side and must be separated. Resistance to partition also carries with it the signal disadvantage of weakening the connection between the Bosnian Serbs and Croats and their co-religionists in Belgrade and Zagreb. It would be far better from the standpoint of enforcing a settlement if the Serb and Croat entities in Bosnia proposed under the Serb-Croat partition plans were abolished and the territories they received in a settlement absorbed by the mother states. Any workable settlement must rest on the ability and willingness of Serbia and Croatia to rein in their

own extremists; the establishment of separate Serbian and Croatian states within Bosnia works strongly against this criterion.

A territorial settlement that left the Muslims at the mercy of their enemies would evidently not constitute a satisfactory long-term solution. It should therefore be a basic objective of Western diplomacy to get for the surviving remnant of Bosnia as much territory as we can while providing it with credible military guarantees. Although it is difficult to speculate on the form these boundaries might take, a few guidelines are apparent. The Muslims ought to be accorded between 30 and 35 percent of Bosnian territory in east central Bosnia and Bihac, and they ought to be given Sarajevo. As the Serbs are a largely rural population and worked nearly 60 percent of the land before the war, it is not unreasonable, quite apart from their existing position of military dominance, that they be given a larger territorial share. Nor ought they to be denied a defensible corridor in the north linking Serb territories. By the same token, however, the largely urban character of the Muslim population, together with the success of the collective presidency in maintaining a multi-ethnic coalition, gives the Izetbegovic government a strong claim to Sarajevo, whose division would in any case provide a fertile ground for future controversy. On the indispensable condition that the Izetbegovic government accepts a territorial compromise, the United States and its allies should hold out for these terms and should be prepared to go to war if the Serbs and Croats will not agree to them. Such a threat cannot be confined to air strikes but must include a willingness to introduce substantial NATO ground forces into central Bosnia.

A settlement among the parties obviously provides the most desirable outcome of the Bosnian war. It should be that settlement at which U.S. diplomacy is primarily aimed even while we accept war against Bosnia's Serbs (and possibly against the Croats) as a possible outcome of our diplomatic posture. No such settlement is likely to be reached, however, in the absence of a willingness on the part of the Western powers to guarantee it. That such a settlement must include a definitive territorial resolution of the Serbo-Croatian conflict and the end of economic sanctions against Serbia seems clear. If it is to be politically effective and morally tolerable, it must also make adequate provision for the critical period of transition. It is in the first stages of a partition that the dangers to human life are greatest; the beginning stages of the agreement's implementation therefore require a large scale commitment of allied forces. Once the lines have stabilized, this force might be drawn down substantially, and its mission would change from ensuring the rescue, protection, and resettlement of civilians to policing clear borders. People would enjoy the right of going to, or staying in, the territories in which they felt safest.

However strong the case for American intervention, it remains a distressing fact that the kind of intervention that is most justified is also the one the United States seems

least inclined to undertake. The most insistent advocates of intervention want a war of righteous indignation to "restore Bosnia" and punish the Serbs, a crusade that could only be carried out in defiance of our NATO allies. It would be supremely ironic were such advocacy to badly prejudice the possibility of containing the magnitude of the catastrophe befalling the Muslims, but such has been the record thus far. The maximalists on Bosnia imagine that their vehemence can do no harm if it pushes the government forward with a plan of intervention; they neglect to consider that the prospect of a war informed by maximalist aims inevitably provokes the passionate opposition of states with whom--given the interests at stake--we ought and need to act in concert. Their heated rhetoric retards, rather than advances, the prospect of an intervention, and it has done so from the beginning.

Clinton's policy, by contrast, works within the constraints set by allies who despise the maximalists and maximalists who despise the allies; hence both its desire to key its threats of force to the lowest common denominator--the continuation of the humanitarian aid missions--and its unwillingness to embrace the principle of partition. Unfortunately, a policy so constrained is likely to succeed only in perpetuating the war through another winter. The American government badly needs to break the mold it has set for itself and pledge its power to a definitive settlement. (1) Aleksa Djilas, "The Nation That Wasn't." *The New Republic*, September 21, 1992, p. 25. (2) See Misha Glenny, "What Is To Be Done?" *The New York Review of Books*, May 27, 1993, pp. 14-15. (3) That a general right to self-determination (understood as conferring a right of secession to a majority within a well defined administrative unit) would be a formula for massive instability seems evident. The words of Robert Lansing, Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state, remain perhaps the most penetrating commentary on the consequences to which this presumed right would lead. "Fixity of national boundaries and of national allegiance, and political stability would disappear if this principle was uniformly applied." It was, he thought, a phrase "loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until too late to check those who attempt to put the principle in force." Robert Lansing, *The Peace Negotiations: A Personal Narrative* (Boston and New York, 1921), pp. 96-98.

For the clearest treatment of the right of secession in the Yugoslavian context, see Richard F. Iglar, "The Constitutional Crisis in Yugoslavia and the International Law of Self Determination: Slovenia's and Croatia's Right to Secede," *Boston College International and Comparative Law Review*, Vol XV, No. 1, 1992, pp. 213-39. For an older but still valuable refutation of a right of secession, see Rupert Emerson, "Self-Determination," *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 65, April 1971, pp. 459-75. For a different view, see Marc Weller, "The International Response to the

Dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," *ibid*, Vol. 86, July 1992, pp. 569-607. (4) See Paul Lewis, "Two Leaders Propose Dividing Bosnia Into Three Areas," *New York Times*, June 17, 1993. (5) That these terms commanded impossibilities may be passed over as a minor point, but they assuredly did so. If the JNA was to be withdrawn, it could not disarm the irregular forces; if the arms embargo was continued on the Muslims, they could not do so either. Who then was to do it?