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## “Bloody as Hell”.<sup>1</sup>

### Bush, Clinton and the Abdication of American Leadership in the former Yugoslavia, 1990-1995

Klaus Larres

Between 1991 and 1995 approximately 200.000 people were killed in the wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, 50.000 women were brutally raped and over two million people lost their homes. Several million people suffered severe physical and indeed psychological injuries in concentration camps, rape rooms and torture cells. An unidentifiably large number of the most brutal and abhorrent atrocities and war crimes were committed. The West, however, remained passive. The western world's two most influential powers - the United States of America and the European Union – did their best to ignore the crisis. When this position became untenable, they lamented loudly about the unfolding events in the former Yugoslavia but still refused to take any decisive military action.<sup>2</sup> Both the US and the EC/EU, in cooperation with the UN, embarked on a number of hectic diplomatic initiatives but chose to shrink back from making use of military force to stop the slaughter. For the first few years of the conflict neither the use of massive air power nor the employment of ground forces was seriously contemplated. Only when the fighting in Bosnia intensified in 1994 and 1995 did Washington begin to move slowly towards considering a bombing campaign to halt the war. This eventually led to the conclusion of the Dayton Peace Accords in November/December 1995.

There is good reason to believe that with a determined effort at preventive diplomacy in the late 1980s and, above all, in 1990-91 the West and in particular the United States could have succeeded in preventing the outbreak of the ten-day war in Slovenia and the much more bloody war in Croatia in the summer of 1991 as well as the terrible war in Bosnia which erupted in April 1992.<sup>3</sup> This, however, was

1. During a visit to Yugoslavia Balkan expert Lawrence Eagleburger, US Deputy secretary of State and a former ambassador to Belgrade, concluded: 'It is going to be bloody as hell'. Quoted in S. POWELL, *A Problem from Hell'. America and the Age of Genocide*, Perennial, New York, 2003, p.253.
2. For good overviews, see M. GLENNY, *The Fall of Yugoslavia: The Third Balkan War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Penguin, London, 1996; L. SILBER and A. LITTLE, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, Penguin, New York, 1996; S.L. WOODWARD, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*, Brookings, Washington DC, 1995; N. MALCOLM, *Bosnia: A Short History*, Papermac, London, 1996. For the policy of the West, see in particular Th. PAULSEN, *Die Jugoslawienpolitik der USA, 1989-1994*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 1995 and J. GOW, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War*, Hurst, London, 1997.
3. Robert L. Hutchings, an NSC official in the Bush administration, sees three junctures where a more forceful western policy would have made a difference: in 1989-91 by supporting Markovic much more strongly, from late 1990 to mid-1991, when the West should have worked on ways to dissolve Yugoslavia peacefully, and in the autumn of 1991 when Serb shelling of Croatian towns like Vukovar and Dubrovnik should have led to western military answers to fight Serb aggression. See R.L. HUTCHINGS, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Policy in Europe, 1989-1992*, Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1997, pp.318-320.

not the conclusion of the George W.H. Bush administration which did not wish to get involved. The subsequent Clinton administration also felt no inclination to embark on a more active policy towards the former Yugoslavia. This article attempts to reconstruct the major elements in the decision-making process in Washington during the presidencies of George W.H. Bush and Bill Clinton. The article will assess whether or not prior to September 1995 both administrations' decision not to get militarily involved constituted in fact a reasonable position to take. Is it indeed 'unfair', as has been suggested by some, to point an accusing finger at policy makers in Washington and proclaim that in the first half of the 1990s the United States as the world's only superpower 'bears the main responsibility' for the West's failure to prevent the outbreak and the continuation of the wars in the former Yugoslavia?<sup>4</sup> This article is mostly concerned with decision-making in Washington and the strategies and policies pursued by the USA rather than with the activities of America's European allies, Russia and international institutions like the UN and NATO.

### **The USA and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia**

The dissolution of the Yugoslavian federal state and the eruption of violence and war occurred at a time when the world was preoccupied with the grand spectacle of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the initially quite controversial process of German unification and the ever accelerating dissolution of the Soviet empire. The Bush administration feared that the dissolving Soviet Union would attempt to use military force to reverse the 'velvet revolutions' in Eastern Europe and use military force to prevent the Baltic countries from leaving the USSR.<sup>5</sup> In view of the danger that the Soviet orbit would implode and lead to widespread anarchy and misery, the Bush administration made great efforts to help stabilise the Soviet Union and keep Gorbachev in power.<sup>6</sup> Soon the Bush administration was preoccupied by the American build-up of a huge desert army to confront the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein who, in early August 1990, had invaded the oil rich Kuwait and was also threatening Saudi Arabia. From mid January to early March 1991 policy makers in Washington largely focused on the Gulf war. Even after the successful liberation of Kuwait, the Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein, the establishment of no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq and the slow moving Israeli-Palestinian peace process allowed the administration hardly any respite. The Middle East remained

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4. D. GOMPERT, *How to Defeat Serbia*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 73/4 (July/August, 1994), p.30.

5. The latter was briefly done in January 1991 and in Lithuania in the summer of 1991. See R.M. GATES, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996, pp.528-529.

6. For a good general account on the end of the cold war, see M.R. BESCHLOSS and S. TALBOTT, *At the Highest Levels: the inside story of the end of the cold war*, Little, Brown, Boston, 1993.

as volatile as ever as did other areas of the world; a horrible civil war, for instance, had broken out in Somalia in January 1991.

In the literature Bush is frequently credited with a great deal of talent and skill with regard to certain successfully managed crisis situations like the process of German unification and the establishment of constructive relations with a weakened Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still, many authors are convinced that despite all this competent crisis management, the administration made no attempt to develop a coherent strategic vision for the post-Cold War era. Bush’s grandly announced ‘New World Order’ is frequently ridiculed as mere rhetoric. Yet, there was very little drift or ‘strategic indirection’ to be found in Bush’s foreign policy. The president as well as his most important advisors like National Security adviser Brent Scowcroft, secretary of State James Baker, Defence secretary Dick Cheney and Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were not inclined to view the unfolding events passively. Instead, they had a clear preconception about the occasions when they wanted to get involved to guide developments.<sup>7</sup>

This also applied to the crisis in Yugoslavia, both before and after the unilateral declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia, Yugoslavia’s two wealthiest republics, on 25 June 1991. Neither political drift nor inattention to the Balkans by default dominated the Bush administration’s policy towards the region. There was no failure of intelligence either; the CIA followed events in Yugoslavia attentively.<sup>8</sup> Rather Bush and his advisors had taken a carefully considered decision. Washington would not get militarily involved in Yugoslavia and was prepared to extend only limited diplomatic support for overcoming the looming crisis in order to attempt, at least initially, to preserve Yugoslav unity. Although Bush relished America’s role as the only remaining superpower and wished to maintain his country’s position as global hegemon, he was not prepared to accept that Washington’s enhanced post-Cold War power and status needed to go hand in hand with accepting global responsibilities.

During the Cold War Yugoslavia under its long-standing leader Tito enjoyed a favourable geopolitical position between East and West and gradually emerged as the leader of the non-aligned world. Not least, Tito displayed great skill and determination in dominating domestic Yugoslav politics by keeping multinational

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7. This is the conclusion of S. HURST, *The Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration: In Search of a New World Order*, Cassell, London, 1999 and most other accounts of the Bush presidency. See in particular the discussions in R.J. BARILLEAUX and M.E. STUCKEY (eds.), *Leadership and the Bush Presidency: prudence or drift in an era of change?*, Praeger, Westport, CT, 1992; see also D.M. HILL and Ph. WILLIAMS (eds.), *The Bush Presidency: triumphs and adversities*, Macmillan, London, 1994).

8. See the article by D. GOMPERT, at the time NSC director with responsibility for Europe within the Bush administration, *How to Defeat Serbia*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 73/4(1994), p.32.

Yugoslavia's six republics under control and taming the forces of nationalism.<sup>9</sup> Although Yugoslavia remained a socialist country and Tito a genuine believer in the benefits of communism, Belgrade managed to maintain its distance from Moscow. Since the break with Joseph Stalin in 1948 and despite Nikita Khrushchev's journey of reconciliation to Belgrade in May 1955, Tito had successfully insisted on Yugoslavia's political independence, economic freedom and special path to communism.<sup>10</sup>

Tito was also careful to nourish good relations with the West and the western world was keen on giving him as much support as possible.<sup>11</sup> Not only did much useful information about the Soviet Union make its way to the West via Yugoslavia but the country's close economic relationship with West Germany and other western countries encouraged other communist states to realise that there was more than one way to run a socialist economy. Thus, during the Cold War the existence of Tito's Yugoslavia served 'as a useful reminder' to the downtrodden countries of Eastern Europe 'of the advantages of independence from Moscow and of the benefits of friendly relations with the West'.<sup>12</sup> Most significantly perhaps, Yugoslavia constituted an 'important obstacle to Soviet expansionism and hegemony in southern Europe'.<sup>13</sup> It was expected that as the only ever 'lapsed satellite', if need be, Yugoslavia would contribute to a 'defensive war against the Soviet Bloc'.<sup>14</sup> Although Yugoslavia was never tempted to join NATO, a considerable amount of American military aid found its way to Belgrade. US assessments reaching back to the 1950s continued to conclude that Moscow 'remains capable of launching an attack on Yugoslavia virtually without warning and the possibility of such an attack cannot be disregarded'.<sup>15</sup> Not least, the US also hoped that the country could be encouraged 'to play a moderating role within the Non-aligned Movement and to counter Cuban and Soviet influence in that organization'.<sup>16</sup>

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9. Yugoslavia's six republics consisted of five nations (Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro) and one multi-national republic, Bosnia, where none of all three ethnic groups – Muslims, Serbians and Croats – had a clear dominance. See for example S. TOUVAL, *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990-1995*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002, pp.11-12.
  10. See R. WEST, *Tito and the Rise and Fall of Yugoslavia*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1994.
  11. See J. GOW, *Triumph of the Lack of Will ...*, op.cit., pp.25-26; and in particular L.M. LEES, *Keeping Tito afloat: the United States, Yugoslavia, and the Cold War*, Pennsylvania State UP, University Park, PA, 1997.
  12. Reagan Administration, National Security Decision Directive 133 'U.S. Policy Toward Yugoslavia', March 14, 1984 [<http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-133.html>].
  13. Ibid.
  14. NATO Strategy Documents, quoted in J. BAEV, *US Intelligence Community Estimates on Yugoslavia (1948-1991)*, p.98.
  15. National Intelligence Estimate, NIE-15, 11 December 1950: Truman Library, Truman Papers, PSF-Subject File [available at: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/korea/nie15.htm>]. Even the dispatch of American forces to support Yugoslavia against invading Soviet troops, considered to be a 'serious' probability in the months after the outbreak of the Korean war, was deemed necessary by the Army Intelligence Agency. See J. BAEV, op.cit., p.97.
  16. Reagan Administration, National Security Decision Directive 133, op.cit.

All this abruptly ended with the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991. Already in early 1989, Warren Zimmermann, the new (and last) US ambassador to Yugoslavia, and Lawrence Eagleburger, deputy secretary of State-designate, concluded that with the impending end of the Cold War Yugoslavia’s ‘former geopolitical significance’ had vanished; the country was ‘no longer unique, since both Poland and Hungary now had more open political and economic systems’. The end of the Cold War also made it more difficult to overlook Yugoslavia’s ‘failure in the human rights area’, in particular in Kosovo.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, Yugoslavia’s perceived geopolitical importance to the US had been in decline for a considerable period of time. The decisive event had been Tito’s death in 1980 and the subsequent rise of domestic instability in the country. In particular, Tito’s successors were increasingly unable to deal with the country’s economic difficulties. The demands of the IMF and the World Bank for severe austerity measures to transform Yugoslavia into a market economy with a balanced budget, to stabilise the country’s financial situation and to pay back western creditors made matters worse. But this unwise austerity strategy which increased tension, animosity and financial competition among the six republics, found support in the United States. The Reagan administration’s National Security Directive 133 of March 1984 expressed Washington’s support for overcoming the country’s ‘severe financial situation’ by expanding American economic relations with Yugoslavia and pushing the federal state towards ‘an effective, market-oriented Yugoslav economic structure’, thus drawing it ever closer into the western orbit.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, this backfired and the flawed and indeed haphazard economic reform attempts of successive Yugoslav leaders made matters worse. In an increasingly tough economic climate Serbs blamed the central Yugoslav government for allocating too many financial resources to the despised Albanians in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Slovenes and Croats blamed the Serbs for discriminating economically and financially against their republics.<sup>19</sup> The federal government in Belgrade saw its authority undermined at an ever more rapid pace; real power rested increasingly with the individual governments in the six republics. Tito’s successors faced the almost impossible task of containing nationalist tensions within Yugoslavia. As Richard Ullman has written:

17. See W. ZIMMERMANN, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, Times Books, New York, 1996, p.7; also *Idem.*, *The last ambassador: A memoir on the collapse of Yugoslavia*, in: *Foreign Affairs* 74/2(March 1995), p.2. For an interesting critique of Zimmermann’s position, see S. LETICA, *The West Side Story of the Collapse of Yugoslavia and the Wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina*, in: Th. CUSHMAN and S.G. MESTROVIC (eds.), *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia*, New York UP, New York, 1996, pp.163-186.

18. Reagan Administration, National Security Decision Directive 133, op.cit.

19. L.H. BRUNE, *The United States and Post-Cold War Interventions: Bush and Clinton in Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia, 1992-1998*, Regina Books, Claremont CA., 1999, p.70.

‘control gradually shifted into the hands of provincial demagogues who styled themselves as democrats and who quickly discovered that beating the drum of ethnic nationalism was the surest way of accumulating more personal power’.<sup>20</sup>

The most skilful of these new nationalist agitators were former communist leader Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, the largest of the republics, and Franjo Tudjman in Croatia.<sup>21</sup> Since these two populists had come to prominence in their respective Yugoslav republics in the late 1980s, the break-up of Yugoslavia had become a real possibility. In 1988/89 Balkan experts in Washington and the EC capitals expressed ever increasing concern about the rising instability and volatility of the region. Yet, Yugoslav federal president Ante Marcovic’s pleading with the IMF and the American government during a visit to Washington in October 1989 for an economic aid package in support of his economic ‘shock therapy’ and his political reform efforts at home led to no tangible results. Preoccupied with the events in Eastern and Central Europe the Bush administration failed on at least two counts: Washington neither gave sufficiently strong support, including economic aid, to Markovic to avoid the disintegration of Yugoslavia nor did the administration prepare for the dissolution of Yugoslavia.<sup>22</sup>

In September 1989 the Slovenian parliament voted in favour of sovereignty. In January 1990 Tito’s communist party effectively dissolved after a tumultuous final party congress. Markovic’s plans for organising federal elections were undermined when both Croatia and Slovenia proceeded to hold free and fair elections and voted for non-communist governments. In a referendum in December 1990 almost 95 percent of the Slovenes voted for independence. They were only prepared not to embark on the path to national independence if a much looser Yugoslav confederation could be agreed upon among the six republics and the federal government within six months. The new Croatian constitution of December 1990 expressed almost identical objectives. The Bush administration, however, needed another few months before recognising that Washington’s insistence on the status quo of a united Yugoslavia was unrealistic. Milosevic, who had been re-elected as Serbian president, blocked the looser federal structure the other republics had agreed to by opposing the routine succession of a Croat to the rotating chair of the Yugoslav presidential council in March 1991. Serbia insisted on the status quo of the old federal Yugoslavia with its Serb dominated institutions.

Pressure from Congress under the leadership of senator Dole helped to move the US administration to a slightly more active policy. Dole, who had denounced the behaviour of the federal Yugoslav government since the late 1980s, visited

20. R.H. ULLMAN, *The Wars in Yugoslavia and the International System after the Cold War*, in: R.H. ULLMAN (ed.), *The World and Yugoslavia’s Wars*, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, 1996, p.9.

21. See for example A. LEBOR, *Milosevic: A Biography*, Bloomsbury, London, 2002. For the complicated relationship between Milosevic and Tudjman, see also A. DJILAS, *A Profile of Slobodan Milosevic*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 72/3 (summer 1993), pp.81-96.

22. For a convincing account, see R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., pp.304-305. For the alleged misjudgment of Marcovic by US politicians, see S. LETICA, op.cit., pp.169-172.



Kosovo in August 1990 and was appalled by the human rights violations there.<sup>23</sup> Although the Bush administration had reversed the US Congress’s decision to implement the Nickles amendment and suspend economic aid to federal Yugoslavian president in early May, it soon concluded that Markovic had lost almost all authority and no longer seemed to be in charge of the Yugoslav army. Eventually, in the early summer of 1991, the White House began advocating a ‘confederation of quasi-sovereign states’ to preserve at least an element of a united Yugoslav state and prevent a descent into anarchy and violence.<sup>24</sup> However, by this stage it was too late for such a structure. Milosevic was acting in an ever more irresponsible way and soon Tudjman embarked on several anti-Serb initiatives in Croatia. This encouraged the overwhelmingly Serbian population in the Croatian regions of Krajina and Slavonia (c. 12% of Croatia’s population) to hold referenda too. The memory of the slaughter of Serbs by a fascist Croatia aligned with Hitler’s Germany during World War II stoked genuine Serb anxieties. Thus, as generally predicted, both regions strongly objected to Croatian independence and expressed the firm intention to remain in Serbian dominated federal Yugoslavia.

The elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which followed in November 1990, resulted in no clear victory for any of Bosnia’s three ethnic groups (Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats). While the Croats wished to join Tudjman’s envisaged Croatian nation state, the Serbs intended to remain within federal Yugoslavia or join a Greater Serbia, consisting of Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and most of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the creation of which was increasingly talked about by Milosevic and his supporters in Belgrade. The Bosnian Muslims, who initially had no great desire to set up an independent state, gloomily concluded that if Slovenia and Croatia left the Yugoslav federation they had no choice but to leave as well. They were well aware, however, that Milosevic’s Serbia would attempt to prevent this under all circumstances. Still, the Bosnians were convinced that remaining in a rump-Yugoslavia whose institutions were dominated by Serbia was unwise. The fate of the long-suffering Albanians in the Serb dominated province of Kosovo seemed to demonstrate that there was no other option than to declare independence if Slovenia and Croatia did so first.<sup>25</sup>

In view of these developments the Bush administration in Washington viewed the situation in Yugoslavia with increasing pessimism. The thinking within the administration was dominated by a great deal of historically based determinism and the belief, as Eagleburger in particular expressed it most vividly, that there was very little anyone from outside Yugoslavia could do to stop the slide into chaos and anarchy.<sup>26</sup> The CIA’s *National Intelligence Estimate* of September 1990, leaked to the New York Times in late November 1990, concluded that ‘the Yugoslav experiment has failed’ and predicted ‘that the country will break up’, a process which was ‘likely to be accompanied by ethnic violence and unrest which could

23. S. POWELL, op.cit., pp. 253-254. See also S. LETICA, op.cit., p.184.

24. See D. GOMPERT, op.cit., p.34.

25. N. MALCOLM, op.cit., pp.124 ff.; W. ZIMMERMANN, *The last ambassador*, op.cit., pp.9-10.



lead to civil war'.<sup>27</sup> The CIA analysis painted the picture of an inevitable process; it was indicated that no outsider, including the US government, would be able to do anything about it.<sup>28</sup> Ambassador Zimmermann's reports to the State Department were also very gloomy. In view of the 'ethnic hatred' planted by Milosevic and others, he did not believe that any break-up of the country 'could happen peacefully'.<sup>29</sup>

### Political Misjudgements before the Outbreak of War

There were at least three major issues which were decisive in the Bush administration's decision not to become involved in a major effort of 'preventive diplomacy' in Yugoslavia before the outbreak of war. They can be subsumed under the keywords 'American national interest', 'Europe's role', and 'Yugoslav unity'. Taken together they demonstrate that the Bush administration's interpretation of the Yugoslavian situation was based on three major misunderstandings.

*1. American national interest.* With the end of the Cold War the Bush administration believed that the Balkans were no longer part of America's sphere of interest. After the end of East-West tension and global rivalry Yugoslavia's strategic importance had ended. The country had 'outlived its importance'.<sup>30</sup> Nor was the Bush administration interested in risking the unprecedented quick triumph in the Gulf war and its greatly enhanced international prestige by dealing with the immensely complex problem in Yugoslavia where it was extremely difficult to differentiate between 'friends' and 'enemies'. The much praised Weinberger-Powell strategic doctrine proclaimed that the US should only get involved in a military conflict if it were able to use overwhelming force and had a clear exit strategy.<sup>31</sup> The complicated and seemingly intractable problem of competing ethnicities and nationalities in the Yugoslav federation and the danger of being sucked into an insoluble political and military quagmire with operations taking place in mountainous countryside rather than in the Middle Eastern desert, where it had been easy to bomb the Iraqi army into oblivion, contributed to a great reluctance in Washington to devote much effort to overcoming the crisis in the Balkans. Above all, as secretary of State Baker wrote in

26. On 29 Sept. 1992 Eagleburger expressed the following view: 'I have said this 38,000 times and I have to say this to the people of this country as well: This tragedy is not something that can be settled from outside and it's about damn well time that everybody understood that. Until the Bosnians, Serbs and Croats decide to stop killing each other, there is nothing the outside world can do about it.' Quoted in: *Center for Security Policy*, Washington, DC, Decision Brief, No.92-D 123, 'Method to the Madness', p.3 [[http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=92-D\\_123](http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=92-D_123)].

27. D. BINDER, *Yugoslavia Seen Breaking Up Soon*, in: *New York Times*, 28 Nov. 1990, p.A7.

28. See also R.L. HUTCHINGS, *op.cit.*, p.306.

29. W. ZIMMERMANN, *op.cit.*, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, pp.83-84.

30. M. DANNER, *The US and the Yugoslav Catastrophe*, in: *New York Review of Books* (Nov. 20, 1997), p.7.

31. See S. POWELL, *op.cit.*, pp.261-262.

his memoirs, Yugoslavia had neither the military power of Iraq, nor, most importantly, the ability to threaten the western world’s oil supplies. In fact, the conflict in Yugoslavia was regarded as a ‘regional dispute’ and a civil war rather than a conflict of global importance and it would not be wise to allow the US to become ‘a participant in the carnage’.<sup>32</sup>

Despite repeated efforts by mid-level officials to persuade their superiors to become proactive in the Yugoslavian crisis, at the highest level the US government refused to recognize the seriousness of the situation and the implications for America’s national interest.<sup>33</sup> The Bush administration, as well as subsequently the Clinton White House, refused to see that even in the post-Cold War years it was still in America’s national interest to be involved in maintaining stability in the Balkans. Only after years of bloodshed with the US and other western governments merely standing by and wringing their hands in despair, was it slowly recognised that the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was undermining the viability of international institutions like the UN and NATO as well as America’s and indeed the entire western world’s international standing.<sup>34</sup>

American pronouncements about the importance of stability in Europe, the centrality of NATO for the post-Cold War world as well as Bush’s grand ‘new world order’ had proved to be empty rhetoric. The entire western world and its institutions, and in particular the US, as the only remaining superpower, looked weak, powerless and incompetent and utterly indifferent to large-scale human suffering.<sup>35</sup>

2. *Europe’s Role*. Instead it was generally concluded in Washington, that the Balkans primarily ought to be a concern of the Europeans. After all, the end of the Cold War, German unification, and the efforts to develop a European foreign and security policy within the Maastricht framework had clearly given Europe a new confidence, if not cockiness. The Bush administration was therefore more than prepared to take Luxembourg Foreign minister Jacques Poos at his word when he confidently proclaimed: ‘This is the hour of Europe, not the hour of the Americans’. The Italian Foreign minister even announced that ‘Washington is being kept informed but is not being consulted’.<sup>36</sup> European willingness, and

32. J.A. BAKER III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989-1992*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1995, pp.636-637, also p.651; T.G. CARPENTER, *Foreign Policy Masochism: The Campaign for US Intervention in Yugoslavia*, Cato Foreign Policy Briefing, No.19 (July 1, 1992), p.4 [available at: <http://www.cato.org/pubs/fpbriefs/fpb-019es.html>].

33. R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., p.314.

34. For the less than impressive role of international organisations in the Yugoslav conflict see the illuminating study by C. GIERSCHE, *Konfliktregulierung in Jugoslawien 1991-1995. Die Rolle der OSZE, EU, UNO and NATO*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 1998.

35. A few years later, in 1994, the Clinton administration eventually came to realise this and this prompted a major shift in policy as will be outlined below. See B. WOODWARD, *The Choice*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996, pp.261-262.

36. Quoted in K. KIRSTE, *Der Jugoslawienkonflikt*, DFG-Projekt ‘Zivilmächte’, Fallstudie, University of Trier, January 1998, 11 [<http://www.deutsche-aussenpolitik.de/resources/conferences/Jugo.pdf>].

indeed desire, to assume the role of mediator in Yugoslavia also fitted in nicely with Bush's dislike of being regarded as the world's policeman in the aftermath of the Gulf war. 'Europe has the most at stake in the crisis', Bush official Ralph Johnson proclaimed and added quite disingenuously, 'European leverage is greater'.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the resources were not readily available either. America was in the middle of a serious economic recession which caused Bush much domestic concern. Although the Gulf war had largely been fought with American troops, most of the money to conduct the campaign had come from abroad, not least from Germany and other European countries. The American taxpayer would have been unimpressed with spending scarce resources on Yugoslavia, an unravelling far-away country that even the administration no longer considered as particularly important. Place names such as 'Sarajevo' also invoked images of the First World War and an America once again dragged into hopeless European conflicts. Instead, in Washington Yugoslavia was soon regarded as a 'test case' for Europe's ambition to set up a comprehensive European foreign and defence policy and for willingness of the EC/EU, for once, to use some of its resources and influence to the benefit of the international community. In his memoirs James Baker explained that it was 'time to make the Europeans step up to the place' and demonstrate 'that they could act as a unified power'. He wrote cynically that 'Yugoslavia was as good a first test as any'.<sup>38</sup>

3. *Yugoslav Unity*. The Bush administration was not inclined to support the striving for independence within the Yugoslavian federal state that might well encourage similar developments elsewhere. CIA director Robert Gates summarises Bush's position well in his memoirs:

'Nearly everyone in the administration believed that the break-up of former communist states risked violence and instability if not carried out in an orderly, peaceful way and through a political-legal process that would limit future blood feuds and passion for revenge or reconquest. This would be Bush's policy on both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia'.<sup>39</sup>

According to a Croatian government official, National Security advisor Scowcroft told him in September 1990 that the US administration 'supported the unity of Yugoslavia at any cost, as well as that of the Soviet Union'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, despite America's own history of secession from the British Empire, for geopolitical reasons there was little sympathy within the Bush administration for the craving for independence among the Slovenian and Croatian people. President Bush and his Balkan experts initially wished to maintain Yugoslavia's unity and later, when this became utterly unrealistic, at least some sort of loose confederation as a unifying link among the republics. Washington's catchword became 'unity in the context of democracy' and Baker explained that the United States based its policy for

37. *Ibid.*; see also D. GOMPERT, *op.cit.*, p.35.

38. J.A. BAKER III, *op.cit.*, p.637.

39. R.M. GATES, *op.cit.*, *From the Shadows*, p.529.

40. See S. LETICA, *op.cit.*, p.184.

Yugoslavia at that juncture on four main principles: democratisation, human rights, market reforms, and above all unity.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, these high-minded principles merely represented moral fig leaves for the administration’s sober *Realpolitik* and ‘uncertain resolve’.<sup>42</sup> The Bush administration was agreed that Yugoslavia should under no circumstances be allowed to serve as a model for the striving for independence among the nationalities in the Soviet Union and contribute to the disintegration of the USSR.<sup>43</sup> The American intelligence community’s and indeed the Bush administration’s worst-case scenario was the open outbreak of hostilities among the Yugoslav republics which might well lead to interference by both Soviet and western troops and might even cause a direct military conflict with the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, the United States did not take any action when in due course all of Baker’s fine principles such as human rights, democracy and Yugoslav unity, were fatally undermined together with the policy of federal Yugoslav Prime minister Ante Markovic, whose liberal reformist agenda supported these principles. Under no circumstances did the Bush White House wish to get involved militarily and see the United States become entangled in a Vietnam-like imbroglio and provoke the Soviet Union into feeling obliged to support its Serbian friends. ‘We got no dog in this fight’ secretary of State James Baker declared at one stage and for geopolitical and strategic reasons he meant what he said.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Bush Administration’s Diplomatic Activities, 1991-92**

In the summer of 1990 and again in January 1991 the State Department attempted to put pressure on America’s European allies to push for some sort of concerted international effort within the CSCE or NATO framework to address the Yugoslav situation diplomatically. Yet, in view of the non-committal replies from France, Germany and Britain, referred to by a former US official as ‘shockingly irresponsible’,<sup>45</sup> Washington was content to let the issue rest. It was only on 21 June 1991 that the United States embarked on its first serious diplomatic initiative to prevent the outbreak of war. Despite personal misgivings and much doubt among his officials Secretary of State Baker paid a visit to Belgrade and conducted talks

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41. S. HURST, op.cit., p.214; R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., pp.307-308. For the ‘unity and democracy’ slogan which the administration appears to have taken seriously, see W. ZIMMERMANN, op.cit., *The last ambassador*, pp.3 and 6.

42. Quote: R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., p.304.

43. See J. BAEV, op.cit., p.104. See Brent Scowcroft’s report on a conversation with Gorbachev in 1991 during which the Soviet leader expressed serious concern about Yugoslavia’s disintegration in view of the problems within the Soviet Union, in: G.BUSH and B.SCOWCROFT, *A World Transformed*, Vintage Books, New York, 1998, p.514. See also on the same episode M.R. BE-SCHLOSS and S. TALBOTT, op.cit., p.414, also p.443.

44. Quoted in R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., p.312; M. DANNER, op.cit., p.58.

45. R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., p.307.

with Yugoslav Prime minister Markovic and the leaders of all the six republics. Baker explained to the Slovenian and Croatian leaders that the US would not recognize them if they declared independence and that they could not expect to receive any economic aid from the US. Even at this late stage he believed that he had no better option than to push for a confederate solution and to admonish all Yugoslavian leaders to observe human rights.<sup>46</sup>

However, Baker's mission was unsuccessful. None of the parties to the Yugoslav conflict changed any of its positions. This was hardly surprising; by June 1991 the respective positions had become firmly entrenched. Baker's mission had come much too late. Moreover, many of the secretary's statements were rather ambiguous and open to interpretation by both sides. Bush's loyal emissary explained that the United States would 'not reward unilateral actions that preempt dialogue or the possibility of negotiated solutions, and we will strongly oppose intimidation or the use of force'. He added that Washington 'continues to recognize and support the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, including the borders of its member republics. At the same time we can support greater autonomy and sovereignty for the republics'.<sup>47</sup>

The Serbs as well as the Slovenes and Croatians could interpret this as meaning that the US was in fact supporting their case. On the one hand, Milosevic and the Serbian dominated Yugoslav army concluded that the United States was in favour of maintaining Yugoslav unity, and would thus continue to accept Serbian predominance in the federation, and overlook the use of force to restore unity. The question has been much debated whether or not Baker inadvertently gave the 'green light' to Serbia's use of violence by indicating there would be no American military interference. As Robert Hutchings has argued, although Baker did not signal a green light, 'he did not flash a red light either'.<sup>48</sup> Slovenia and Croatia, on the other hand, also listened carefully to Baker's words and concluded that in the end the United States would not really oppose their sovereignty once they had declared their independence. This they did shortly after Baker's return to Washington. On 25 June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia and declared their independence. Fighting broke out within days.

The Bush administration watched from the sidelines.<sup>49</sup> Neither NATO, which did not have any geographical authority over the Balkans, nor the CSCE seemed to be suitable to contain the fighting at an early stage. The use of both organisations was opposed by the Soviet Union in any case and any employment of NATO air strikes or forces would have drawn the United States into the conflict, and even given it a leading position. This was anathema to the Bush administration. The White House was thus very happy to go along with the European desire not to make use of NATO but to rely on bilateral cooperation between the EC and the

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46. For a good account of his mission, see R.L. HUTCHINGS, *op.cit.*, pp.309-312; J.A. BAKER III, *op.cit.*, pp.634-635.

47. K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, p.8.

48. R.L. HUTCHINGS, *op.cit.*, p.311.

49. For a detailed account, including hectic EC attempts to negotiate, see *ibid.*, pp.312-313.

US.<sup>50</sup> Washington left it to the EC to attempt to contain the violence in Croatia and prevent the spread of war into other republics by diplomatic means. The American dimension of the EC’s hectic negotiating efforts largely consisted in the person of former secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who became the UN secretary general’s special envoy to Yugoslavia. The US supported the UN Security Council’s arms embargo on all parties in Yugoslavia in late September 1991 as well as the imposition of economic sanctions on Serbia. However, Bush was not prepared to let American soldiers participate in a UN peace-keeping force in Croatia to oversee a cease-fire there. Cyrus Vance and Lord Peter Carrington, the EU envoy, managed to negotiate the cease fire in November 1991; it left more than a quarter of Croatian territory in the hands of the Serbs. A former Bush official made it unambiguously clear that the administration rejected the notion that the US should act as a global policeman.

‘Our military superiority and international leadership role does not obligate us to sacrifice our sons and daughters to combat brutality wherever it occurs... George Bush and his lieutenants studied the facts and concluded that leadership in this crisis would have had major drawbacks for the United States’.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout 1991-92 when first Croatia and then, in April 1992, Bosnia descended into war and terrible human sufferings, the Bush administration remained passive. The CIA’s Directorate of Intelligence set up an Interagency Balkan Task Force, which met almost daily by means of teleconferencing, and the US was thus very well informed about the developments and the enormous human rights violations on the ground in Bosnia.<sup>52</sup> But the US hoped that European and UN efforts and their negotiators Lord David Owen, who succeeded Carrington, and Cyrus Vance would be able to halt the fighting. Within the West there were serious disagreements about the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia; only after the exertion of much German pressure were both countries formally recognised by the EC in mid-January 1991 (after Germany had previously recognised both countries in late December with the aim of internationalising the problem). The Bush administration was deeply annoyed and believed that this was counterproductive to restoring stability and aiding Vance’s mediating efforts in Yugoslavia. Germany in particular thought, however, that the international recognition of the two republics might deter Serbia from going to war against them. The United States was not convinced but offered no alternative solution.<sup>53</sup>

50. D. GOMPERT, op.cit., pp.35-36. For NATO’s role in the conflict, see G. KOSLOWSKI, *Die NATO und der Krieg in Bosnien-Herzegowina: Deutschland, Frankreich und die USA im internationalen Krisenmanagement*, SH-Verlag, Vierow bei Greifswald, 1995.

51. D. GOMPERT, op.cit., p.41.

52. Thus Samantha Power’s question ‘What did the United States Know?’ can be answered with the words ‘almost everything’. See her “*A Problem from Hell*”, op.cit., p.264. See also R.L. HUTCHINGS [op.cit.], who writes that the task force ‘soon fell into a routine’ and eventually merely designed the kind of memos their political masters wanted to see (p.320).

53. For the transatlantic conflict over the recognition issues (and in particular for the German-American conflict in this context), see German diplomat M. LIBAL’s forceful defence of the recognition of Slovenia and Croatia: *Limits of Persuasion. Germany and the Yugoslav Crisis, 1991-92*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, 1997.



When a referendum in Bosnia in late February 1991 demonstrated that two thirds of the Bosnian population favoured independence, the United States insisted on the recognition of Bosnia by the EC as a condition of Washington's simultaneous recognition of Croatian and Slovenian independence. This was agreed in March 1992 and recognition was extended to Bosnia in April 1992 by both the EC and the US. Shortly afterwards the Bosnian Serbs seceded from Bosnia and established their own state. War broke out within a matter of days. The Bosnian Serbs, led by Radovan Karadzic and strongly supported by Milosevic in Belgrade, and newly independent Croatia attempted to conquer and annex as much of Bosnian territory as possible.<sup>54</sup>

The West was totally unprepared. Although in view of what had happened in Croatia the Bosnian war came as no surprise, the western world assumed an ostrich-like attitude to the impending disaster which befell the newly recognized country. A UN peacekeeping force had not been assembled and sent to Bosnia before the outbreak of war and no western country called for the withdrawal of the Yugoslav People's Army from Bosnia.<sup>55</sup> The US, with the support of the EC, pushed for the expulsion of federal Yugoslavia from international institutions, refused landing rights to its national airline, closed Yugoslavian consulates in the US and strongly advocated economic sanctions, including an oil embargo, on Yugoslavia.<sup>56</sup> In June 1992 the Bush White House even displayed a certain tentative readiness to consider participating in a UN airlift to bring aid deliveries to the besieged Sarajevo if a prior cease-fire could be achieved.<sup>57</sup> But this was as far as it went. It also made no difference when in May and June the United States became aware of the atrocities and war crimes committed in Bosnia. Media reports made them eventually public knowledge in August 1992. Although secretary Baker spoke of a 'humanitarian nightmare in the heart of Europe' and admonished the international community that 'none of us should try to find reasons for not taking some sort of action' to overcome the conflict, he was not advocating the use of military force by the western community; nor was the Bush administration ready to embark on unilateral American action. Instead, Baker repeated: 'we are not, and we cannot be, the world's policeman'.<sup>58</sup>

54. For a biography of the Bosnian Serb leader and indicted war criminal, see P. KÖPF, *Karadzic: die Schande Europas*, Econ, Düsseldorf, 1995. See also R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., pp.315-316.

55. D. GOMPERT, op.cit., p.37.

56. S. HURST, op.cit., pp.216-217

57. See T.G. CARPENTER, op.cit., p.4.

58. Quoted in S. HURST, op.cit., pp.217. On the role of the media in influencing western responses, see M. THOMPSON, *Forging War: the media in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina*, rev. and expanded ed., Luton UP, Luton, 1999). For the complex military dimension of the war, see Ch.R. SHRADER, *The Muslim-Croat civil war in Central Bosnia: a military history, 1992-1994*, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 2003; and the memoirs by W.K. CLARK, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the future of combat*, Public Affairs, Oxford, 2001; M. ROSE, *Fighting for Peace: Lessons from Bosnia*, Warner, London, 1999; and B. STEWART, *Broken Lives: a personal view of the Bosnian conflict*, HarperCollins, London, 1993.



According to Steven Hurst’s detailed study of the Bush administration, the Bush White House focused on three objectives: to enable international relief organizations to deliver humanitarian aid to Bosnia, to continue the political and economic isolation of Serbia and to prevent the expansion of the conflict into other areas of the Balkans. One can add another major objective, the desperate attempt not to be dragged into the Yugoslavian quagmire by committing American air power or even troops. The more vicious the war became, the more adamant the Bush administration was not to get involved; Vietnam always loomed in the mind of American politicians.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, Serbia’s ever more blatant ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Bosnia and the UN’s increasingly desperate attempts to deliver aid to the Bosnian people made western public opinion take increasing notice of the humanitarian catastrophes in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>60</sup> Washington soon found itself exposed to great pressures to do something about Serbian and Croatian aggression. Eventually, on 26 June 1992, against the opposition of the Pentagon which was largely dismissive of the civilian belief that air power alone could be decisive, Bush and Baker decided to ask the UN Security Council for a resolution authorizing the use of air power for opening an aid corridor to Sarajevo. Such a resolution was eventually passed on 13 August 1992. Almost two months later a second resolution for the creation of a ‘no-fly’ zone over Bosnia was also passed. The United States seemed to be edging ever closer to the use of air strikes against the Serbs to protect the Bosnian people. The presidential election probably made the difference. Bush was clearly influenced by his Democratic challenger Bill Clinton who attempted to demolish Bush’s image as a foreign policy expert by using the president’s softness towards Milosevic to expose the flaws in the White House’s foreign policy.<sup>61</sup>

However, the administration still insisted on a multilateral approach with the EC and pronounced that any violation of the no-fly zone over Bosnia would make it seek UN authorization for the use of air power against the violators. Thus, any use of force by the United States still involved a very cumbersome process. Moreover, there was not even any clear willingness to employ NATO and American air power to pressurise the Serbs into honouring the agreements reached at the London conference of August 1992. The results of the conference, if honoured by Serbia, which signed the agreement, would have contained the fighting, including the war

59. See C. POWELL (with J.E. PERSICO), *My American Journey*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1995, p.544. Colin Powell told a reporter that he ‘had been engaged in limited military involvements before, in Vietnam for starters’. He continued: ‘As soon as they tell me it’s limited, it means they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me “surgical”, I head for the bunker’. See also R.L. HUTCHINGS, *op.cit.*, p.313.

60. See N.L. CIGAR, *Genocide in Bosnia: the policy of ‘ethnic cleansing*, College Station, Texas, 1995; M.A. SELLS, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996; R. SOBEL and E. SHIRAEV (eds.), *International Public Opinion and the Bosnia Crisis*, MD. Lexington Books, Lanham, 2003.

61. Th. HALVERSON, *American Perspectives*, in: A. DANCHEV and Th. HALVERSON (eds.), *International Perspectives on the Yugoslav Conflict*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1996, p.10.

crimes, and would have allowed humanitarian aid to reach Bosnia.<sup>62</sup> Nor did the US participate in the extension of the UN's peace-keeping activities into Bosnia in September 1992. The largest troop contingents for this initiative came from the UK and France. As this meant that only European troops and no American forces would be exposed to any Serbian revenge for allied air strikes, the UK and France were less than enthusiastic about endorsing the use of airpower which the United States gradually appeared to contemplate.<sup>63</sup> However, in late September 1992 it could be read in the *Washington Post* that European officials who had met with US Defence secretary Dick Cheney believed that Bush had 'decided to avoid any military action in Yugoslavia or Iraq before the U.S. elections on November 3'.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed in 1992 no air power was used to restrain Serbian aggression and war crimes in Bosnia. Although in late 1992 Bush offered to employ American air power if the Serbs harmed UN personnel, due to the UK's lack of interest this did not materialize. However, shortly before his presidential term ended in January 1993 president Bush decided to lift the arms embargo on all parties in the conflict. After all it had been clear for a long time that both the Croatian and the Bosnian armed forces were inferior to the much better equipped Serbian forces. Once again, both Britain and France blocked this envisaged reversal of policy.<sup>65</sup> Instead, it was hoped that the Vance/Owen peace plan, which had been proposed in January 1993 would resolve the situation. It envisaged the partition of Bosnia into three ethnically divided parts with ten sub-sections and a multinational capital Sarajevo. Yet, the plan was viewed sceptically in Washington though, as Vance and Owen pointed out, any alternative solution would require the deployment of US troops. The US argued that the plan left 70 per cent of the country's territory in Serbian and Croatian hands and would thus reward the aggressors; it was also feared that it would lead to further 'ethnic cleansing'. Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic took the hint and also refused his agreement to the plan when he spoke at the UN in New

62. For an account of the conference, 'perhaps the last chance to restore Western resolve before Bosnia-Herzegovina was destroyed', see R.L. HUTCHINGS, op.cit., pp.316-318 (quote: 316); J. GOW, *Triumph of the Lack of Will ...*, op.cit., pp.224-231; also J. MAJOR, *The Autobiography*, Harper Collins, London, 1999.

63. United Germany – despite the country's early recognition of the new Yugoslav republics - did not participate in these considerations as at that time it was still believed that the German constitution forbid the country to become militarily involved in NATO out-of-area activities. Only in 1994 did Germany's highest court clarify that this was indeed not the case and that the German Basic Law did not prohibit UN sanctioned German military activities beyond the NATO area. However, the Kohl government was also convinced that it was inadvisable to send German troops into countries which had been occupied by the Nazis during World War II.

64. See J. HOAGLAND's editorial, *Washington Post*, 29 Sept. 1992, cited in Center for Security Policy, Washington, DC, Decision Brief, No.92-D 123 'Method to the Madness', p.1 [[http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=92-D\\_123](http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/index.jsp?section=papers&code=92-D_123)]. For the complex moral, political and military problems of humanitarian intervention, which cannot be addressed here, see St. HOFFMAN (ed.), *The Ethics and Politics of Humanitarian Intervention*, Notre Dame UP, Notre Dame, Ind., 1996.

65. For a good but highly critical account of British policy towards the former Yugoslavia, see B. SIMMS, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia*, Allen Lane, London, 2001.

York on 6 February 1993. Negotiations of the Vance/Owen plan soon stalled in Geneva and after 8 February also at the UN in New York.<sup>66</sup>

In his memoirs US ambassador Zimmermann reaches the conclusion that the failure to use air power in 1992 was America's 'greatest mistake of the entire Yugoslav crisis', 'it wasted the opportunity to prevent over a hundred thousand deaths'.<sup>67</sup> In his study of the Bush administration Steven Hurst profoundly disagrees with this statement. Although he is correct in writing 'that others were equally, if not more, culpable for the disaster that struck Bosnia',<sup>68</sup> this does not let the Bush administration off the hook for sharing a very large responsibility for doing hardly anything to avoid or at least curtail the war and the humanitarian disaster in the former Yugoslavia.

The Bush administration's refusal to employ US air power in mid-1992, its stubborn unwillingness to embark on preventive diplomacy long before Baker's last minute trip to Yugoslavia in June 1991 as well as the White House's desperate efforts to attempt to preserve the unity of the federal state when the likelihood of achieving this was remote demonstrated that Washington misjudged the developments in Yugoslavia. Moreover, Washington's refusal to recognise that the maintenance and restoration of peace and stability in the Balkans were a matter of American national interest and that the only global superpower had indeed global responsibilities when other powers were unable to cope demonstrate the failure of Bush's policy in Yugoslavia. It is perhaps indicative that in George Bush's and Brent Scowcroft's joint memoir the conflict in Yugoslavia is hardly mentioned. The Bush administration's Yugoslavian policy was based on a number of serious political misjudgements as well as on the deliberate decision to abdicate US leadership.

American keenness to allow Europe to take the lead in the Yugoslav crisis is understandable in view of Europe's self-confident pronouncements about the effectiveness of its post-Cold War role in international affairs. And naturally few countries will refuse the offer by other states to take their chestnuts out of the fire. Yet, the poor European performance in the Gulf war and the long-standing difficulties of the EC in agreeing on joint positions and policies, in particular in foreign affairs and most other non-economic issues, and its inability to execute any agreed positions in an effective way were well known. It could easily have been predicted that Europe's emerging foreign and defence policy would have great difficulties coping with the complex Yugoslav situation. The Croatian government was certainly convinced that not the Europeans but 'only the American administration had the real power to avert war'.<sup>69</sup> The abdication of American

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66. See J. GOW, *Triumph of the Lack of Will ...*, op.cit., pp.232ff.; David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995); also W. HYLAND, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy*, Praeger, Westport, Conn., 1999, p.32; K. KIRSTE, op.cit., pp.27 ff.

67. W. ZIMMERMANN, op.cit., *Origins of a Catastrophe*, p.216.

68. S. HURST, op.cit., p.218.

69. See S. LETICA, op.cit., pp.183-184. The author is a former Croatian government official who was close to president Tudjman.

leadership in the face of an unfolding human catastrophe of enormous proportions must be judged harshly. The Bush administration failed the innocent peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

### Bill Clinton and the Continuation of American Passivity

The same could be said of the Clinton administration's first two years in office. Despite Clinton's tough rhetoric before the election, once he was inaugurated he became much more cautious. Forgotten were statements which emphasised that Washington should join an international coalition force 'to shoot its way into' Sarajevo airport to organise an airlift to Bosnia<sup>70</sup> and that Clinton intended to adopt 'much more aggressive positions than his predecessor'.<sup>71</sup> In early 1993, when the war in Bosnia became ever more ruthless, the new president was tempted to involve the United States militarily but the apparent lack of public support in the United States and in the Congress for such a course of action and the fear of embarking on another Vietnam-like situation made him hesitate. Clinton, like his predecessor, did not believe that America's national interest was at stake in the former Yugoslavia and thus only 'modest risks' appeared to be justified as the conservative *National Review* expressed it.<sup>72</sup> Secretary of State Warren Christopher put it unambiguously when he said that Bosnia 'does not affect our vital national interests except as we're concerned about the humanitarian matters and except as we're trying to contain it'.<sup>73</sup>

Above all, Clinton wished to preserve allied unity and did not wish to act unilaterally and without European endorsement and agreement in Bosnia. The unity of NATO appeared to be more important than halting the slaughter in Bosnia. Yet, Washington only followed the course of multilateralism so rigidly because Yugoslavia was not regarded as of major importance to the USA. The European refusal to contemplate western military involvement, gave Clinton a convenient alibi to explain why Washington was unable to employ air power.<sup>74</sup>

Like his predecessor, Clinton had no intention of turning the United States into the world's policeman. Within the United States both liberals and conservatives were firmly set against the use of American ground forces. The American political establishment outside the administration was largely in agreement that the 'lift and strike' option ought to be pursued, that is the lifting of the arms embargo on all parties in Yugoslavia and the threat of NATO air strikes against Serbian forces. The

70. December 1992. Similar statements explained that 'Anything we can do to turn up the heat a little there, to try to reduce the carnage, is worth trying'. Quotes in Th.H. HENRIKSEN, *Clinton's Foreign Policy in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and North Korea*, Stanford University, Stanford, 1995, p.14.

71. See J. CLARKE, *Rhetoric before Reality: Loose Lips and Ships*, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 74/5(Sept/Oct. 1995), p.6.

72. Quoted in W. HYLAND, *op.cit.*, p.38.

73. Quoted in K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, p.25.

74. See in a similar vein, *ibid.*, 26.

administration itself, however, was divided. While UN ambassador Madeleine Albright and vice president Al Gore favoured military intervention, secretary of State Warren Christopher, National Security adviser Anthony Lake as well as the entire Pentagon, including Colin Powell, who continued as Chief of Staff until September 1993, and Clinton's domestic policy advisers were strongly opposed to American military involvement.<sup>75</sup>

Much to the anger of most European governments, the Vance/Owen plan did not find Clinton's support either. He favoured a re-negotiation of the plan. In early February 1993 the new administration wished to demonstrate a new decisiveness when Christopher announced a six-point plan which included the intention to send a new American special envoy (NATO ambassador Reginald Bartholomew) to the peace negotiations, to make use of tougher sanctions and enforce the no-fly zone. Nothing was said about lifting the arms embargo on Yugoslavia. And Clinton did not commit himself to deploying American troops as peacekeepers in the Balkans either. Yet, the situation in Bosnia deteriorated rapidly; the war spread ever more widely. Both in Europe and the United States there was increasingly outspoken opposition to American passivity in the face of clear evidence of atrocities, massacres and widespread 'ethnic cleansing'.<sup>76</sup> In March 1993 twelve officials in the State Department sent Christopher a strong letter demanding American military involvement and in a leaked memorandum Madeleine Albright asked Clinton to use air power to prevent any further Serb advances.<sup>77</sup> Yet, opinion polls in the US showed the large-scale opposition of most Americans to intervention and the majority of members of Congress were not inclined to go down this path either. The Vietnam experience was in everyone's mind. In particular the highly influential Colin Powell opposed the use of any American military involvement; he scared Clinton with the prospect that at least half a million troops would be needed if the president decided to engage US forces.<sup>78</sup>

Although in view of the continuation of massacres and other war crimes committed in Bosnia, Clinton seriously contemplated military action in the course of April 1993, the administration restricted itself to merely air-dropping food supplies into eastern Bosnia. Some commentators have argued that the failure of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to arrest a religious cult group of Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, contributed to Clinton's unwillingness to send troops to Bosnia and thus expose his government to yet another controversial decision. Although the FBI rather than the American administration was responsible for the disastrous handling of the Waco siege which resulted in the fire

75. See I.H. DAALDER, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington DC, 2000, pp.11 ff.; Th.H. HENRIKSEN, *op.cit.*, p.15.

76. See R. GUTMAN, *A Witness to Genocide: the 1993 Pulitzer Prize-winning dispatches on the 'ethnic cleansing' of Bosnia*, Element Books, Shaftesbury, 1993; also St.L. BURG and P.S. SHOUP, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: ethnic conflict and international intervention*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 1999.

77. W. HYLAND, *op.cit.*, pp.35-36.

78. See C. POWELL, *op.cit.*, p.544.

death of 89 people, including children and several FBI agents, for years Clinton had to repulse suggestions from the conservative right that somehow his administration had been responsible for this unfortunate outcome.<sup>79</sup>

Still, Clinton knew that while he continued to rule out American military involvement, something needed to be done. The 'lift and strike' plan began to look increasingly appealing. He sent Christopher to Europe to consult with the allies. However, most European governments, in particular French president Mitterrand and British prime minister Major, were opposed to this option.<sup>80</sup> And Clinton also became increasingly doubtful about the plan. After all, it could be expected that even very limited air strikes might well lead to an escalation of American involvement in Bosnia and finally perhaps even to the need to deploy ground troops. While Christopher was consulting with the European allies, his mission was undermined by the President's second thoughts. Moreover, the French rejected the 'lift and strike' plan outright and criticised the United States for not participating in the UN peacekeeping forces in Croatia and Bosnia. After all, the UN peacekeepers were strictly forbidden from aiding the Bosnians. They were expected to maintain a neutral role. Both the French and the British feared that a lifting of the arms embargo would expose the UN forces to revenge attacks by Serbian forces and might perhaps even result in UN soldiers being taken hostage by the Bosnian Serbs. This publicly announced concern certainly gave the Serbians ideas on how to handle the peacekeepers. Paris and London proposed instead to establish 'safe havens' in six areas in Bosnia, including the capital Sarajevo.

This was a humiliating outcome for the Clinton administration. Yet the President decided not to impose a solution on the Europeans; instead he accepted the European veto regarding the 'lift and strike' option and shrank back from military engagement. He blamed the Europeans while the Europeans claimed that Christopher could have persuaded them if he had made an effort. Eventually, in late May 1993 the French and British plan for setting up 'safe havens' in Bosnia was endorsed by the US and its European allies when the foreign ministers met in Washington. Another attempt in July to persuade the Europeans to endorse a 'lift and strike' policy also failed.

The dramatic display of American inability to impose a military resolution on the crisis in Somalia, which unfolded in early October 1993, certainly made

79. See S. BLUMENTHAL, *The Clinton Wars*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 2003, p.54.

80. During a conversation with former British Foreign secretary Douglas Hurd in London on 18 March 2004, Hurd emphasised that with hindsight, and with the exception of some fairly minor matters, he believed that Britain's policy of not getting involved in Bosnia and employing air power had been correct in view of the British troops on the ground which would have been greatly exposed to any revenge attacks by the Serbs. Incidentally, Lawrence Eagleburger confirmed that he still believed in the correctness of Bush's Yugoslavian policy in a conversation on 20 May 2003 in Washington, DC (as does James Baker emphatically in his memoirs [op.cit., p.651]). For the largely pro-Serbian position of the French and the British and the pro-Bosnian position of the US, see for example J.A. BAKER III, op.cit., p.637; J MAJOR, op.cit.; M. BRAUNSTEIN, *François Mitterrand à Sarajevo: 28 Juin 1992, le rendez-vous manqué*, Harmattan, Paris, 2001; also S. BLUMENTHAL, op.cit., p.62.



Clinton much more risk-averse in the subsequent months than he might otherwise have been. Eighteen American soldiers were killed, the corpses dragged through the streets by rebel troops in the service of warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid and burnt in front of the world's television cameras. Within a few days Clinton announced the humiliating withdrawal of all American forces from Somalia.<sup>81</sup>

By late 1993 any forceful western initiative to save Bosnia from destruction had been shelved. As William Hyland has written, the United States had 'no real strategy: Vance-Owen was dead; lift and strike was dead; military intervention had been ruled out; there was no prospect of a settlement. Bosnia was closer than ever to disappearing as a state'.<sup>82</sup> The saga continued throughout 1994 with neither the United States nor the Europeans able to develop a coherent strategy of how to save Bosnia. However, by mid February 1994, after the marketplace massacre in Sarajevo on 5 February 1994, which caused a bloodbath among civilians, Clinton had gradually come to the same insight president Bush had also arrived at rather belatedly: that the former Yugoslavia was in fact part of America's national interest. All of a sudden Clinton explained that in

'this crisis our nation has distinct interests. We have an interest in helping to prevent this from becoming a broader European conflict [...]. We have an interest in showing that NATO remains a credible force for peace in the post-Cold War era. We have an interest in helping to stem the destabilizing flow of refugees [...]. And we have a humanitarian interest in helping to stop the strangulation of Sarajevo'.<sup>83</sup>

### **A Cautious Change of Course**

These fine words, however, did not immediately lead to a dramatic new policy. Instead Bill Clinton proceeded cautiously and covertly. In April 1994 Clinton personally embarked on a policy of 'covert inaction' by allowing the delivery of arms from Iran to Bosnia via Croatia. During the flight on the return from Richard Nixon's funeral National Security advisor Lake suggested to Clinton that he should allow Iranian arms deliveries without however officially condoning them or informing the National Security Council and other cabinet members. When Croatian president Franjo Tudjman asked US ambassador Peter Galbraith about the proposal, Galbraith replied that he had 'no instructions', thus effectively giving American agreement to the plan.<sup>84</sup>

The United States also participated in the so-called Contact Group consisting of the US, Russia, Britain, France and Germany to find a multilateral solution to the

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81. See for example L.H. BRUNE, *op.cit.*, pp.13-34; also S. BLUMENTHAL, *op.cit.*, pp.61-62.

82. W. HYLAND, *op.cit.*, p.38.

83. Quoted in K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, p.26.

84. See E. SCIOLINO, *Now, Iran-Bosnia: Who Knew What and When?*, in: *New York Times*, 21 April 1996. The hostile account by Thomas Henriksen [*op.cit.*, pp.16-17] distorts the issues somewhat.



Bosnian problem. Yet American participation was unenthusiastic. As the American representative, ambassador Charles Thomas, said in an interview:

‘I think, the administration has been quite reactive and was mainly trying to avoid problems. It was a desire to have a limited involvement that was diluted by the presence of other major powers’.<sup>85</sup>

Still, the Serbian shelling of the market in Sarajevo in February 1994 had led to a certain change of course of American policy. Washington began to make a greater effort to persuade the Bosnian government to accept the partition of the country after all. On 5 July the Contact Group suggested a formula for a partition of Bosnia (51 per cent for the Bosnians; 49 per cent for the Serbs) and proposed an armistice. But both the Bosnian Muslims and the Bosnian Serbs refused to accept the formula and the armistice. The Contact Group could not devise a way out and intense bickering among its members led to a stalemate.<sup>86</sup>

Of crucial importance for Clinton’s policy towards Bosnia were his relations with Congress after the congressional elections of November 1994. The Republicans managed to take control of both Houses of Congress and Senate majority leader Bob Dole once again began to push strongly for a termination of the arms embargo on Bosnia. Although Britain and France continued to resist this, the White House announced that the United States would not continue enforcing the arms embargo.<sup>87</sup> Increasing congressional pressure, the stalemate in the Contact Group, the Sarajevo massacre as well as a successful counteroffensive by Croatian forces in May 1994 encouraged Clinton to continue with cautiously changing his policy. When in the late summer 1994 Croatian forces ejected Bosnian Serb forces from the Krajina (and in turn began a process of ‘ethnic cleansing’) and the military situation was rapidly changing in favour of the Croats,<sup>88</sup> the US administration felt encouraged to get militarily involved.

Above all, with the gradual onset of the presidential election campaign in mid-1995 Clinton believed that he needed to take the initiative on Bosnia. Constant attacks on his administration regarding the situation in Bosnia made him look bad at home. Congressional pressure led Clinton to terminate the multilateral observation of the arms embargo and to cease cooperation between the allied espionage agencies in Bosnia on 12 November 1994. Although the President had attempted to persuade the Europeans to agree to the ending of the arms embargo, when they remained unconvinced, Clinton felt that in view of an ultimatum imposed on his administration by the US Senate to lift the arms embargo he had no other choice than to act unilaterally.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, in early spring 1995 new French

85. K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, p.32; see also J. GOW, *Triumph of the Lack of Will ...*, *op.cit.*, 260-264.

86. K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, pp.34-35.

87. However, at the same time the administration agreed in the UN Security Council to restrict the mandate of the UN peacekeepers and thus limit UNPROFOR’s self-defence capabilities.

88. See B. O’SHEA, *Crisis at Bihac: Bosnia’s bloody battlefield, including the Carter initiative, Croatia reclaims western Slavonia, the fall of the Krajina Serbs*, Sutton, Stroud: Gloucestershire, 1998.

89. K. KIRSTE, *op.cit.*, pp.39-40.

president Chirac came out in favour of the use of massive NATO airpower against the Serbs. This drove a wedge in the Franco-British opposition to the use of military force and enabled Washington to push its preference for a cautious use of airpower.<sup>90</sup>

The conquest of the UN-declared ‘safe havens’ Srebrenica and Zepa in July 1995 by the Bosnian Serbs under general Radko Mladic focused international media attention on the former Yugoslavia. The ruthless destruction of the two cities and the nearby countryside and the rape, deportation and execution of thousands of people deeply moved the western world.<sup>91</sup> The Clinton administration began to realise that America’s ‘unique superpower status’ was ‘the only hope for restoring a semblance of order and humanity to the Balkans’.<sup>92</sup> Not least, the deteriorating situation made Clinton look indecisive and unable to assert American leadership even more than hitherto. ‘To bolster his image at home, he needed to appear more decisive abroad’.<sup>93</sup>

Clinton decided to embark on a cautious policy of military involvement by letting NATO bomb Bosnian Serb positions in Bosnia. Intensive NATO air strikes in August and early September 1995 resulted in a change of mind by the Bosnian Serbs. They reduced their territorial demands on Bosnia (from two thirds to half of the country) and withdrew some of their heavy weaponry from Sarajevo. The Bosnian Muslims agreed to recognise the Bosnian Serb republic; it was generally expected that the mini state would align itself with what was left of Yugoslavia to form Greater Serbia under Milosevic’s leadership. The acceptance of a peace process by the Bosnian Serbs on 21 September eventually led to a cease-fire by mid-October 1995. This in turn enabled the negotiation of the Dayton agreement in November/December 1995, led by US envoy Richard Holbrooke, on the basis of the partition of Bosnia. The Dayton agreement was far from ideal but it led to an uneasy peace and a stability of sorts which has largely endured.<sup>94</sup>

With hindsight many members of the Clinton administration regretted the long delay before the US became involved. This delay essentially encompassed the first eighteen months of the Clinton administration, until the USA decided to push more seriously for air strikes on the Serbian positions. Warren Christopher, for example, frankly writes in his memoirs that the US ‘had relied unrealistically and for longer

90. *Ibid.*, p.35.

91. For a good account, see S. POWELL, *op.cit.*, pp.391-441; and in even greater detail, D. ROHDE, *Endgame: the Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica: Europe’s worst massacre since World War II*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1998; and J.W. HONIG and N. BOTH, *Srebrenica: record of a war crime*, Penguin, London, 1996. For the media, see J. GOW et al. (ed.), *Bosnia by Television*, British Film Institute, London, 1996. See also A. STIGLMAYER, *Mass rape: the war against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994.

92. W. CHRISTOPHER, *Chances of a Lifetime*, Scribner, New York, 2001, p.252.

93. Th.H. HENRIKSEN, *op.cit.*, p.18.

94. See R. HOLBROOKE, *To end a War*, Modern Library, New York, 1999; I.H. DAALDER, *op.cit.*; E.M. COUSENS and Ch.K. CATER, *Toward peace in Bosnia: implementing the Dayton accords*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, Colo., 2001; also the memoirs of UN envoy C. BILDT, *Peace Journey: the struggle for peace in Bosnia*, Weidenfeld, London, 1998.

than was justifiable on our European allies to resolve the problems in Bosnia'. He even admitted that

'our failure to recognize earlier than no other organization or state was going to assume that role was a lapse for which I and the rest of the Clinton national security team shared responsibility'.<sup>95</sup>

This belated insight and acceptance of responsibility did not help the victims in Bosnia a great deal. However, unlike the preceding Bush administration, the Clinton administration eventually changed course. A variety of factors led to this development. Among the most important ones were the outcry of American and western public opinion in view of the atrocities and massacres committed in 1994 and 1995 in Bosnia. Congressional pressure was also important. But perhaps decisive was Clinton's perception that the war in Bosnia threatened to undermine substantially the continued existence of NATO and the western alliance. Moreover, his own political profile became tarnished and he was increasingly perceived in the US and in Europe as a weak and indecisive leader. This began to harm him with the American electorate. It took these factors and five long years to convince Washington that the world's only remaining superpower continued to have special responsibilities in the post-Cold War world.

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95. W. CHRISTOPHER, *op.cit.*, p.252.