

July 20, 1992

## U.S. AND BOSNIA: TOO LATE, WRONG WAR

### INTRODUCTION

The tragedy of Bosnia continues. The United Nations' effort to relieve the besieged Bosnian capital of Sarajevo is expanding into a larger military effort to protect the supply convoys and secure overland routes. After months of indecision, and a year of conflict in Yugoslavia, the Bush Administration is preparing to intervene militarily to provide air cover and logistical support for the U.N. forces. America's West European allies are contemplating their own action.

The carnage in Bosnia and the local combatants' ruthlessness have produced increasing outrage around the world, fed by nightly television reports. The international force now assembling was prompted in large part by exasperation over the failure of past diplomatic efforts to stop the bloodletting. But the understandable desire to "do something" and end the perception of Western impotence may have the effect of prompting the wrong action. Before the U.S. assumes the obligations entailed in a commitment of American forces to this area, even in a supporting capacity, the potential consequences of this course of action need to be fully understood.

**Short-Sighted, Ineffective.** There may be a role for U.S. forces in Bosnia, but the White House has yet to make a compelling case for American intervention at any level. In fact, the Administration's handling of the series of crises stemming from the disintegration of Yugoslavia over the past year has demonstrated that its policy toward Yugoslavia has been poorly informed, short-sighted, and ineffective. The risk is that this latest move toward deeper engagement is yet another step in that series, but one with far greater potential consequences.

If the Bush Administration is intent on American involvement, its policy toward Bosnia should flow from a general reexamination of American interests and commitments in the post-Cold War era.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the familiar structures of the Cold War rapidly are becoming outdated. In this new era, U.S. interests will be more difficult to define and American power less clearly useable to good effect. Laying the foundation for

advancing American interests in this new era should be a priority. Despite much talk of a New World Order by the Administration, however, few guidelines have emerged.

The destruction of the Soviet Union has ended the last major threat to Europe and thus the need for America to continue to bear the principal responsibility for the continent's defense. One certain objective of U.S. policy toward Europe should be to reduce the need for U.S. involvement to maintain order in Europe and to transfer that responsibility to the European powers. Bosnia and the larger crisis in Yugoslavia offer an opportunity to begin that process.

## THE CALCULUS OF INTERVENTION

Instead of rushing into action in Bosnia, the U.S. should formulate a clear policy to achieve specific objectives. To guide this process, it is necessary to answer three questions:

### **Question #1: What are U.S. interests in Bosnia and throughout the former Yugoslavia?**

There are no vital U.S. interests at stake in the Bosnian struggle. However great the suffering and however violent the conflict in that region may be, there is no likely outcome that would seriously threaten any significant American interests. Nor is there substantial risk that any major U.S. interests will be threatened by turmoil in any other area of the former Yugoslavia, from Croatia to Macedonia.

This near-irrelevance of Yugoslavia to U.S. interests is a marked change from the recent past. During the Cold War, the integrity and stability of Yugoslavia was of great importance to the U.S. and the West. Former dictator Josip Broz Tito received considerable support from the U.S. and the West, which were eager to bolster his defiance of Moscow and keep Yugoslavia out of Soviet control. Yugoslavia's strategic importance to the West, however, largely has disappeared with the demise of the Soviet threat to Western Europe. The impact of upheaval in that country today need not extend any further than its own borders.

Those U.S. interests in Yugoslavia which remain in the aftermath of the Cold War are much less important than before and are more difficult to define. Beyond an undeniable humanitarian interest in alleviating the wide-spread suffering produced by the region's many conflicts, specific U.S. interests are difficult to identify. Many observers point to a poorly defined goal of preserving stability in Europe, a stability now presumably threatened by the events in Yugoslavia. However, it is far from certain that the conflict and chaos in Yugoslavia will have a serious destabilizing impact in its own region, much less throughout Europe. And in the unlikely event that it did spread to its neighbors, there is virtually no prospect that the conflict would lead to war among the larger European powers, now that the Soviet Union is no more. In the absence of an aggressive power willing and able to exploit conflict, Europe today can tolerate considerably more disorder without serious threat to its own security.

Without a major threat to American interests, therefore, it is difficult to see a compelling reason for U.S. military involvement in the conflict. There may be other purposes for the use of force, but Washington has not made them clear.

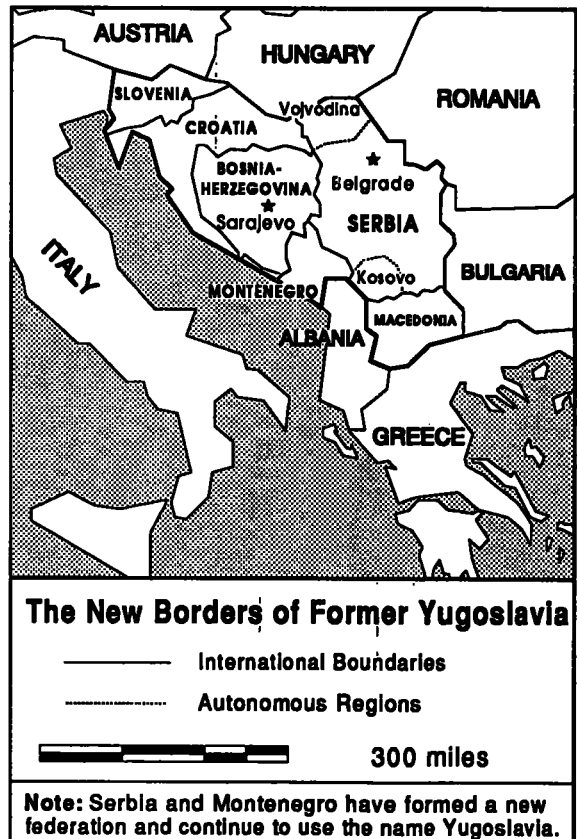
**Question #2: What are the dynamics of the conflict in Bosnia and how is U.S. Intervention likely to affect them?**

The Bush Administration's policy toward the disintegration of Yugoslavia has demonstrated scant understanding of the complexities of the crisis. The result has been not only an ineffective policy but actions that have worsened the conflict. Now that U.S. and Western military intervention is underway, there is a need for a better grasp of the underlying dynamics of the crisis and the effect that Western military intervention is likely to have on them.

One reason for the Administration's failure is that its policies toward Yugoslavia have been formulated less for their intended impact on Yugoslavia itself than for their anticipated effects in other places, most important in the former Soviet Union. The Bush Administration's stubborn insistence last year that Yugoslavia be kept intact stemmed directly from its number one priority of preventing the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Independence for the Yugoslav republics of Slovenia and Croatia was resisted strongly because of fears that this would encourage independence for Ukraine, Georgia, and the other Soviet republics, and thereby bring about the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fall of then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

That the Bush Administration's strategy toward Soviet Union was profoundly misconceived—and ultimately unsuccessful—only underscores the error of having used it to determine U.S. policy toward Yugoslavia. Unfortunately, this pattern continues. Yugoslavia still is seen as a microcosm of the former Soviet Union, and U.S. and Western actions regarding Bosnia and Yugoslavia continue to be formulated in a context of their anticipated impact further east. Thus, in the minds of many, Serbia's attacks on Croatia or Bosnia are dubiously interpreted as being but a precursor of Russia's invasion of Ukraine or Estonia, and U.S. and Western actions must be devised to send the appropriate signals to Moscow and Kiev.

To some extent, Western policy makers may be motivated by a desire to send a warning to would-be aggressors. Unfortunately, the message already sent—and received—by the West's actions toward Yugoslavia over the past year is that Western threats and Western actions are separated by a wide gulf and that a determined and skillful aggressor can accomplish his goals if the planned offense is not too provocative.



**Powerful Nationalism.** In addition to this inattentiveness to Yugoslavia in its own right, it is evident that the Bush Administration has an insufficient grasp of many of the dynamics underlying the succession of crises in that country. First among these is the powerful role played by resurgent nationalism. Bush Administration officials repeatedly have demonstrated their distaste for nationalism in Yugoslavia and elsewhere. Just prior to the failed coup in the Soviet Union in September 1991, President Bush traveled to the Ukrainian capital of Kiev to condemn what he termed "suicidal nationalism" and to advise those Soviet republics seeking independence to abandon their quest and instead support Gorbachev's government. Similarly, when announcing economic sanctions on November 9, 1991, in an attempt to halt the fighting in Yugoslavia, Bush added a blanket condemnation of nationalism. But regardless of whether nationalism is seen as good or bad, it remains a very powerful force in the shaping of events in Yugoslavia and elsewhere and cannot be wished away by Western displeasure. Only those policies which understand and take into account the role it plays have any chance of success.

Beyond nationalism, there is little apparent understanding of the existing political dynamics throughout Yugoslavia and the effectiveness of Western action. The belief that Slovenia's and Croatia's bids for independence last year could be thwarted by the withholding of Western recognition was never realistic. Far from preventing conflict, this approach was an important ingredient in prompting it. Given the Serbian government's public statements and demonstrated willingness to use force in pursuit of political objectives, the West's calculated distancing from Slovenia and Croatia was an open invitation to military action by Serbian forces and was seen as such at the time by many Western observers as well as the Serbian government.

In place of its doomed effort to keep Yugoslavia together against the wishes of its own people, the U.S. and the West would have had a better chance of preventing conflict by delivering a sharp, credible warning to the Serbian government not to resort to force—perhaps by threatening some of the very intervention they are now brandishing a year later. Instead, following their initial invitation to war, the Western response to the Serbian invasion of Croatia was a year of declarations and condemnations which the Serbian government correctly interpreted as empty rhetoric, and which it ignored. Eventually, the U.S. and the West were forced to recognize Slovenia's and Croatia's independence, but only after a preventable war and the occupation of one-third of Croatia by Serbia.

**The Bosnian Crisis.** Motivated in part by a desire to prevent a repeat of its error regarding Slovenia and Croatia, the West has rushed to recognize the independence of Bosnia and to assume ever-greater responsibilities in defense of that republic's sovereignty. What would have been appropriate in the earlier situation, however, now almost certainly is a hurried mistake. The U.S. and the West are supporting an artificial state, one which enjoys allegiance from only a minority of its own population. For unlike Croatia, Bosnia is not under direct attack from Serbia but rather from its own population.

In contrast with Slovenia and Croatia, which have long-established and clearly defined ethnic identities and histories, Bosnia was an administrative creation of Tito. No one ethnic group constitutes a majority: approximately one-third of the population is Serb, one-fifth Croat, and the rest largely Muslim. Most of Bosnia's population does

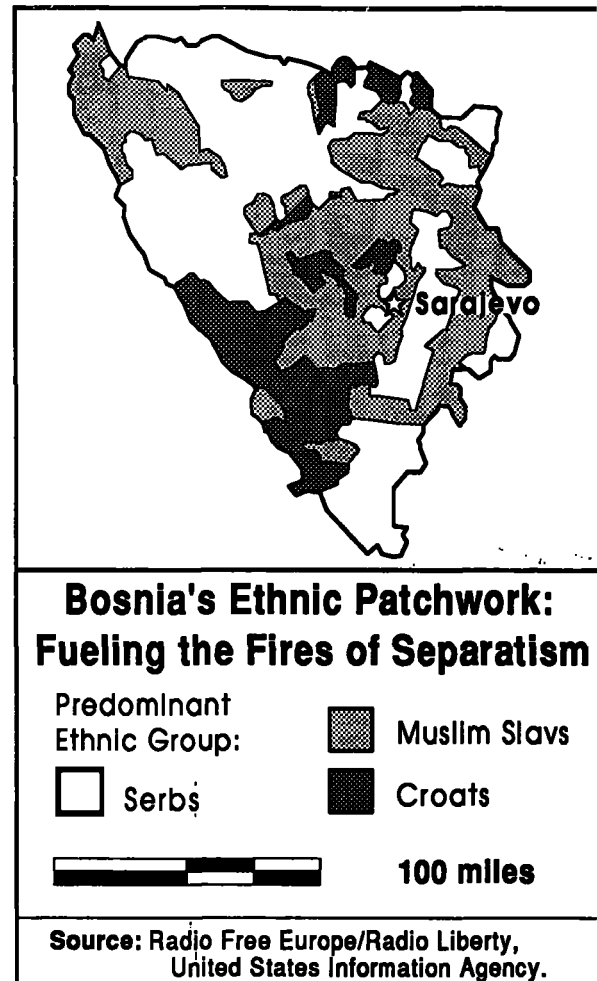
not want to be part of an independent Bosnia but instead would prefer to join their ethnic brethren in neighboring states: the Serbs wish to be part of Serbia, the Croats part of Croatia. The 44 percent of the population which is Muslim may wish a separate political existence, but they do not have the power to maintain Bosnia's independence against the wishes of the non-Muslim majority of the population and their supporters in the surrounding states.

No well-planned compromise or fervent wish by Western statesmen is likely to prevent repeated efforts by the Serb and Croat populations to rejoin what they see as their national states. Already, the Bosnian Serb militias are estimated to control up to two-thirds of Bosnia. Most of the rest is under the control of Bosnia's Croatian population. The area still under the authority of the Bosnian government—Sarajevo and the surrounding territory—shrinks daily.

In the contest between the West's rigid insistence on the permanence of borders and the resolve of these populations to exercise self-determination, the former is likely to lose. Thus, any Western effort to preserve the independence and territorial integrity of Bosnia will be both costly and misconceived.

**The Problem of Serbia.** At the root of the crisis in Bosnia and the Yugoslav mess in general is the problem of Serbia. While the Serbian regime is widely and correctly condemned as an aggressor—directly in Croatia and elsewhere, indirectly in Bosnia by backing Serbian insurgents in that country—its actions have obscured the fact that they are based on deeply felt grievances by the Serbs. No lasting solution in Yugoslavia is possible without resolving them.

Much of the Western confusion about Yugoslavia stems from a simplistic view of the conflicts there as the result of the ethnic feuds and hatreds portrayed in much of the Western media. Although the ethnic dimension is ever-present, fundamentally these are political conflicts that trace their roots to the Tito era. In the border changes made by Tito's communist government soon after it came to power in 1945, Serbia, the largest of the six republics, was greatly reduced in size; large areas with Serb populations were transferred to the jurisdiction of other republics, most notably Croatia and Bosnia. This was a deliberate effort by Tito to weaken Serbia and thereby better ensure his rule over Yugoslavia. To some extent, it also reflected the intermixed nature of many of



these populations. In this process, Bosnia was created by an administrative act and its population belatedly informed that they now were citizens of a new republic.

Much of the Yugoslav crisis today is an attempt by the Serbs, Croats, and others to undo their arbitrary division and rejoin what they regard as their national states. This yearning to overturn Tito's legacy has been exploited by many national leaders in the Yugoslav crisis.

**Chief Culprit.** Although few involved in this crisis can escape condemnation, without question the chief culprit is Serbia's president and former head of its communist party, Slobodan Milosevic. Far from being drawn reluctantly into the conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia, and elsewhere, Milosevic actively has sought to inflame them. With his base of power in Serbia undermined by the demise of communism, and faced with economic collapse, Milosevic has tried to shore up his power by aggressively identifying himself with Serbian nationalism. To do so, Milosevic has remade himself as the defender of Serbia. To produce this image, he has manufactured external enemies and ensured a continuing series of crises in order to silence domestic opponents of his regime.

Bosnia is not the first place where Milosevic has stirred up trouble. Kosovo, a region of Serbia populated largely by ethnic Albanians, was subjected to repeated and deliberately provocative attacks by Milosevic's government beginning in the mid-1980s, with the government-controlled press fabricating reports of anti-Serb atrocities. The resulting public demands for protection of the Serbs led to a brutal crackdown and rule by force in the region. Similarly, the moves toward independence by the republics of Slovenia and Croatia last year prompted reports in the Serbia press of attacks on Croatia's Serbian minority. The Serbian government responded with several shows of force and finally an invasion of Croatia by Serbian forces, beginning with sporadic attacks in August and quickly increasing in intensity. This led to the occupation by Serbian forces of one-third of Croatia, most of it populated by Serbs. In a change of tactics, the war in Bosnia now is waged largely by militias drawn from the indigenous Serbian population of Bosnia but with the direction and support of Milosevic's government.

The West has condemned Serbia for its aggression and has imposed a variety of diplomatic and economic sanctions in an attempt to isolate the regime. But the West's refusal to understand the base of Milosevic's power—his image as defender of Serbian minorities and interests—has contributed to his retention of power. Western policies that take no account of Serbian national aspirations simply will play to his strength. Instead, the U.S. and the West should make clear to the Serbian population that Western enmity is directed solely at Milosevic and his regime, not at Serbia or the Serbian people, wherever they may live, and that the U.S. and the West will give strong support to a peaceful resolution of these national problems.

**Question #3: How and under what circumstances can the U.S. extricate itself from its military intervention?**

Any proposal for U.S. intervention should have not only well-defined aims but should also lay out a realistic strategy of ending that involvement. Without it, the U.S. risks becoming increasingly entangled in a difficult conflict with no clear end.

If the American role is limited to supporting the international relief effort, it should be understood that there is little prospect that the fighting in Bosnia will stop until one side achieves victory. The most likely outcome will be that the Serbs and Croats partition most of Bosnia's territory. Under these conditions, the U.S. commitment in Bosnia will be an indefinite one, unless it is prepared at some point to walk away from the conflict even though no settlement has been reached. Even a mission restricted to humanitarian aid, the establishment of a land corridor to secure the resupply of Sarajevo, will bring with it the very difficult military problem of keeping it open.

If the U.S. goal is a more ambitious one of upholding the Bosnian government and restoring its authority, even a massive troop involvement is unlikely to be sufficient. Unlike Kuwait, Bosnia's problems stem not from an external invasion which can be rolled back by Western intervention; instead, they are a product of the determination of a majority of its own population—albeit with significant outside support and direction—to be rid of Bosnia and to merge their territory with neighboring states. Bosnia already has been partitioned *de facto* by heavily armed militias operating with the full support of millions of their ethnic kin.

**Permanent Occupation?** Under these conditions, it is difficult to see how anything less than a massive Western military intervention and permanent occupation can prevent the separation of the Serbian and Croatian areas. Any attempt by the West to do so, of course, certainly would produce a long guerrilla war. The "Bosnian" population justifiably would regard the reestablishment of the authority of the Bosnian government as a foreign imposition. And if the West seeks to restore the administrative borders of Bosnia, there remains the problem of continued Serbian occupation of Croatian territory. The question thus arises: Is the West to free only Bosnia or should it move on to Croatia?

Finally, there is the problem of the Serbian government. As long as the Milosevic government continues in Serbia, there is little chance for peace in Bosnia. The reason: Belgrade's political interests now are served by stirring up conflict. A limited operation to remove the Serbian government will not work, but a military drive to Belgrade, Yugoslavia's capital, is not feasible. Any guerrilla war in Bosnia resulting from Western intervention would pale in comparison to that which an invasion of Serbia would bring.

There also may be no need to move militarily against Belgrade. There is a good chance that increasing domestic opposition to Milosevic's regime will eventually bring down his government. Large-scale anti-Milosevic demonstrations are occurring in Belgrade, as are increasing defections from his regime and open opposition from such institutions as the Serbian Orthodox Church. The U.S. can encourage these efforts by making clear that, while it opposes the Serbian government, it supports a peaceful resolution of the Serbian population's legitimate grievances. Conversely, Western disregard for these grievances and for the fate of Serbian minorities throughout Yugoslavia will only strengthen Milosevic and make more difficult any resolution.

Under these circumstances, and without a clear political goal, the use of force is unwise. America should not get militarily involved in Bosnia unless it knows the circumstances under which it can extricate itself without damage to its own interests and to those it is trying to help.

## THE CASE FOR INTERVENTION

Although there are no vital American interests directly at stake in the conflicts in Bosnia and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, the U.S. does have other interests which the Bosnian conflict may help to advance. For Bosnia is a case study of the need for a reevaluation of American interests and commitments in the post-Cold War era.

During the half-century of the Cold War, the U.S. shouldered the major responsibility for the defense of the West and the maintenance of order around the world. Throughout this era, the U.S. provided the leadership, bore the principal costs, and fought the wars. The collapse of the Soviet empire has changed this world fundamentally. Nevertheless, the mental habits from this era linger, and American intervention continues to be reflexively called for in conflicts around the world.

Despite repeated references to a New World Order, the outlines of the post-Cold War world—and American interests and responsibilities in it—remain to be defined by Washington. Without this context, attempting to determine U.S. interests in Bosnia, or even throughout all of the former Yugoslavia, can only produce the vague and uncertain conclusions which heretofore have characterized the Administration's policies. Instead, the deliberations regarding possible U.S. intervention in Bosnia should proceed in the context of redefining America's broader interests and of rethinking the role of American power in securing them. In the case of Bosnia, U.S. policy should be formulated as part of a reshaping of America's larger European policy.

**U.S. Interests in Europe.** The fundamental American interest in Europe is not ensuring the stability of the continent but preventing its domination by an anti-Western power. During the Cold War, an extensive American involvement in Europe was necessary to counter the enormous military power of the Soviet Union, and instability was feared because of the certainty of its exploitation by Moscow. With the threat of the domination of Europe now ended by the collapse of the Soviet empire, the strategic situation has changed dramatically. War in Yugoslavia and even regional instability throughout the Balkans no longer is a sufficient threat to American fundamental interests to mandate an automatic U.S. involvement.

Nevertheless, stability remains very important to America's overall European policy. It is essential to the peaceful development of Eastern Europe and to solidifying the most important accomplishment of the U.S. during the last half-century: the pacification of Europe. The demise of the Soviet Union, however, means that it is no longer necessary for the U.S. to shoulder the principal burden of securing that stability, as it did throughout the Cold War era. In this new era, U.S. interests lie not just in promoting stability, but in reacquainting the West European countries with their responsibility for maintaining order in Europe.

Accomplishing this objective, however, is easier said than done. The West Europeans' long dependency on the U.S. for their defense has atrophied their ability and desire to assume the unpleasant and unfamiliar burdens of defending themselves. Their appetite for maintaining order beyond their own borders is even less. The weak, almost comically inept, European response to the Yugoslav situation is a clear demonstration of the debilitating effects of this dependency.



The Bush Administration's decision last year to allow the Europeans to take the lead on the Yugoslav crisis was a good one, but it did not take into account the enervating effects of their long dependency on the U.S. Seen as an easy test of the West Europeans' determination to expand their cooperation on defense, the situation in Yugoslavia instead has exposed deep differences among them and demonstrated the hollowness of European security cooperation, undermined as it is by political maneuvering and narrow self-interest. Despite French President Mitterrand's June 25 trip to Sarajevo and his insistence on greater Western action, the French government has been much more preoccupied with devising ways of reducing U.S. influence in post-Cold War Europe and on hamstringing any action anywhere by Germany than of facilitating joint European action in Yugoslavia. None of the other governments are eager for intervention, and all have seized upon the U.N.'s involvement as the panacea they have been waiting for.

**The U.S. Role in the Crisis.** Despite their many meetings, debates, and proclamations on the Yugoslav crisis, the Europeans have succeeded in accomplishing little other than demonstrating their disarray. After a year of such confusion and indecision, reentry by the U.S. into the dispute has become necessary to prompt European action.

The method by which this occurs will do much to determine whether or not anything of lasting value emerges. To begin with, the U.S. should not encourage the United Nations' involvement in Yugoslavia. In addition to the U.N. being an ineffective and unreliable instrument for the advancement of American interests, the Bush Administration's reflexive turn to the U.N. for legitimation of its policies is creating dangerous precedents. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft's July 6 statement that U.S. forces would not be committed to Bosnia without authorization by the Security Council has the effect of conditioning U.S. policy on U.N. approval. However misplaced this resort to the U.N. may be in regard to Bosnia, it is certainly ill-advised in terms of its implications for U.S. foreign policy in general.

The U.N.'s taking responsibility also undercuts what should be a key U.S. goal: getting the Europeans to undertake the action themselves. The Europeans will seize upon any method to escape from the Yugoslav problem, but it is in America's interest that they do not. To do so, the U.S. must encourage, prompt, even demand joint European action.

The U.S., however, must not take the lead in any Western effort. The reason: Doing so will encourage the Europeans to return to their past pattern of relying on the U.S. to handle their security problems. Instead, the U.S. role should be to pressure the Europeans to take effective action themselves.

Once such a course is set, the U.S. can help with the logistical and other support deemed necessary. While U.S. air and naval assistance could easily be offered, the West Europeans have sufficient forces for the task and have no real need for U.S. military participation other than for political reasons.

The same approach holds true for crafting a political solution to the region's problems. The content of that solution—be it a revision of borders, maintenance of the status quo, or some other approach—is of less importance to the U.S. than that the Europeans themselves take the lead in fashioning it and that they are prepared to uphold it.

Those who would resist such a course out of fear of a loss of U.S. influence in Europe should understand that this influence already has diminished rapidly and will continue to do so, regardless of any policy that Washington might adopt. The collapse of the Soviet empire means that the West Europeans' need for the U.S. to defend them has largely disappeared. Far from lamenting this fact, the U.S. should be relieved to be free of this enormous burden. Nevertheless, the U.S. will continue to have many important interests in Europe and must seek to establish a new system for securing them to replace the one now fading. That system cannot be based on continued U.S. interventions, nor need it be. Instead the Europeans should be encouraged to police their own continent. For there are far more serious problems that await them beyond Bosnia. The fears of chaos in the former Soviet Union are sobering ones, but none of the problems there are beyond the ability of the Europeans to solve for themselves. It is very much in their interest, as well as that of the U.S., that they learn this as soon as possible.

## CONCLUSION

The conflict in Bosnia is a tragedy. It has also exposed the unreadiness of the U.S. and the West to respond to the realities of the post-Cold War world. For the U.S., the correct response to the carnage in Yugoslavia is not to rush to "do something," heedless of the outcome, and uncertain of the goals. Rather, the U.S. should proceed deliberately, with a clear understanding of its global interests in this new era now taking shape. The situation in Bosnia, as with events elsewhere, should be approached from the perspective of how best to advance those interests. Hurrying into Bosnia may do little to help the population there, but it runs the risk of involving the U.S. in a conflict for which no solution, and thus no exit, is known.

America need not, and will not long wish to, continue to assume the principal burden for keeping order around the world. But it does have an interest in the maintenance of that order. Only by encouraging its allies, past and future, to assume their proper share of the burden can it safely relinquish the lion's share of the responsibility.

**New Task for America.** Three times in this century—in World War I, World War II, and throughout Cold War—the U.S. was forced to intervene in Europe to pull it back from the brink. Through its long involvement in Europe, the U.S. has transformed the continent from one of warring dictatorships to one in which permanent peace and prosperity are within reach. Its task now is to see Europe securely settled into a stable equilibrium so that another intervention will never be necessary.

The U.S. cannot accomplish that objective through a policy of direct intervention. Its principal goal should be to help the Europeans overcome the effects of their long dependence on its protection. That can come only from America's standing back and encouraging the Europeans to see that the responsibility for peace on their continent is now their own.

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