

Hesitant to Engage: US Intervention in the Balkans from Yugoslav Dissolution to the Kosovo Campaign

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Abstract: *This article aims to assess the US interventionist approach in the Balkans in the 1990s. It examines the respective approach as it underwent changes towards a more pragmatic and coherent stance in three phases: the initial reluctance to intervene, the decisive engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), and the closing engagement in the Kosovo campaign. In this respect, the US Balkans policy was chiefly consistent in its values from the start, but suffered from disparities between principles and practice and thus lacked appropriate modes of implementation. This specific lack was gradually reduced and a more consistent and responsive approach adopted.*

Keywords: *Dissolution, Yugoslavia, Western Balkans, Intervention, US Foreign Policy, Clinton, Bush Snr., Bush Jnr., BiH, Croatia, Serbia*

1. Introduction

Considering the fact that Washington played a key role in stopping the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia, this article is aimed at examining respective US approach to intervention in the Balkans in the 1990s. The article is methodologically structured as to identify, analyze and explain US approach in three different phases where changes towards a more pragmatic and coherent stance in US policies occurred. Therefore, arguments presented here are structured accordingly as to show that respective US approach to the crisis in the Balkans may be divided into three different stages: the initial reluctance to intervene, the decisive engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), and the closing engagement in the Kosovo campaign. In addition, US Balkans policy is here understood as chiefly consistent in its values from the start, on the one hand, but largely suffering from disparities between principles and practice, and thus lacking appropriate modes of implementation, on the other. Subsequently, this specific lack was gradually reduced, and a more consistent and responsive approach adopted instead. Lastly, considering the amount of literature on the topic at hand, especially ‘realist’-oriented authors, this article is chiefly

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critical of those attitudes assigning most, if not all, responsibility for Balkan disorder of the 1990s to Washington alone.

2. Hesitant Washington

When the Secretary of State Cordell Hull remarked to a joint session of Congress in 1943 that ‘the opportunities for future peace and stability shall not be lost,’ (Muir 2004: 1) he was surely not thinking about the Balkans. With Allied success in the Second World War and throughout the years of the complicated but triumphant European unification project shielded by American military might and advanced by joint economic enterprise, the face of Western Europe changed. However, as the East-West polarization faded away in the late '80s with the Soviet Union in decline, the crisis in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) challenged the international community at the end of the Cold War. Precisely at the time of the dissolution of the USSR, when East Central Europe was being peacefully transformed from a political and economic satellite of the Kremlin into Europe ‘whole and free,’² SFRY disintegrated in chaos. Changes in the political and economic environment in Europe (Kissinger 1994) directed a change in US policies, and especially so towards SFRY, whose political leadership was unable to fully appreciate international change and was still largely operating in the disappearing balance between East and West.

Although external factors had a noteworthy influence upon SFRY, and especially so if the specific Cold War position of the country is taken into account, they may not be solely held accountable for the demise of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. For example, the IMF's economic policies towards SFRY had had a substantial impact on developments in the country from the mid-1980s, when the IMF tied credits to political reform (especially after 1986 and the issue of changing voting rules from consensual to majoritarian in the Yugoslav National Bank). These policies were aimed at strengthening capacities of the Federal Government that were already seriously weakened in relation to increasingly more powerful republican elites (Woodward 1995). However, assigning the collapse of SFRY to one specific factor may be rather misleading and, in this respect, amounts to nothing more than simple reductionism. As Jović points out, it was not

² US President Bush Snr. addresses citizens of Mainz, Federal Republic of Germany, 1989, available at: <http://usa.usembassy.de/etexts/ga6-890531.htm>

external (international) factors³ which sealed the Yugoslav fate, but rather a specific ideological breakdown as such (Jović 2009). This very ideological collapse that introduced political instabilities embodied in power struggles within the ruling Yugoslav elites, as well as inter-elite conflicts on both federal and republican levels, was largely to blame for the consequent Yugoslav chaos and the start of hostilities in 1991 (Jović 2009).

Moreover, with the economic collapse of the 1980s, fertile ground for opposition to the Federal Government was firmly established in an increasingly nationalist agenda manipulated by the ruling republican elites (Dragnich 1991), most notably by the Republic of Serbia led by Slobodan Milošević, thus changing Yugoslav politics for good. Interestingly, this is precisely the reason, both in the popular view and within some academic circles, that the Yugoslav conflict came to be perceived as predominantly and sometimes even exclusively ethnically-driven. This (mis)understanding (at times presented in Western political circles as a major reason for non-interference in yet another ethnic dispute in the Balkans) was largely popularized by international media, which often underlined ethnic principles - ‘old ethnic hatreds’- as central rather than secondary to the crisis, thus portraying this element not as a by-product of the said crisis but rather as basis for it (Sadkovich 1998).

Generally speaking, the response of the White House to the crisis in Yugoslavia can be characterized as initially very cautious.⁴ While the European Community was finalizing negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty, Washington had, in the words of James Baker, the then US Secretary of State, “fought two wars, one major war in Panama and one in the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf War was a major war where we had 550,000 of our troops engaged. We had unified Germany. We had presided over the collapse and the implosion of the Soviet Union,⁵ before the Balkans situation developed. We had convened the Madrid peace Conference, where Arabs and Israelis sat down together for the first time face-to-face ... and our European friends were really anxious to have the leadership of the Yugoslav problem” (quoted in Lino 2006). Namely, the White House sought to boost European morale by letting the European Community (EC) engage in SFRY, especially in the light of pressure from the European side trying to act as

³ There are authors who claim that Yugoslavia disappeared primarily due to foreign influence, chiefly of an economic nature. For example, the Canadian economist Michel Chossudovsky has been one of many such authors. He is a fervent critic of US Foreign Policy, which he considers imperialistic. See Chossudovsky 1997.

⁴ On the international response towards the dissolution of Yugoslavia, refer to Weller 1992. Also see Freedman 1994, Mandelbaum 1994, and Pavlowitch 1994.

⁵ The Yugoslav crisis had a very specific impact upon international views on possibly similar scenarios in the USSR with even more disastrous results. On these views and Russian foreign policy in the Balkans in the ‘90s, refer to Headley 2008.

one bloc (Common Foreign and Security Policy, CFSP) and the potentially greater influence that Europe might have in its own backyard (Gow 1997). In this respect, one may argue that Washington did not disregard the region, but willingly remained somewhat in the background while the Europeans, emboldened by feats of economic and political integration, led the way (Gow 1997). As far as stated principles are concerned, it is reasonable to claim that the White House kept a relatively steady line: economic reform (Weller 1992), political plurality coupled with respect for human rights (Zimmermann 1996), or what Warren Christopher actually called ‘nurturing democracy’ (Christopher 1998), became Washington’s fundamental principles in dealing with SFRY from the late ’80s. Reiterated by both the US Ambassador Warren Zimmermann in 1989 and the Secretary of State James Baker during his visit to Belgrade in mid-1991, Washington hoped to avoid dissolution of the joint state and the possible conflict that was anticipated (Gutman 1993, Glaurdic 2011). The White House rejected the use of force by the Federal Army (Binder 1991) (the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), as it was then called), and underlined commitment to the united Yugoslav state.

This Western commitment to a united SFRY and its Federal Government, however, remained rather problematic simply because the West seemed both cautious about and somewhat confused by what might happen in SFRY if the country broke up.⁶ Thus, the Serbian leadership and those close to it within the higher ranks of the JNA saw this as a sign of collective unwillingness on the part of the West to engage, if need be, by means of force in SFRY. When the conflict actually started, the White House principally held it to be a specific combination of ethnic disputes and aggression from the Serbian side coupled with state-preservation and national self-determination efforts (Gow 1997), which was already a significantly complex view. For that matter, Washington undoubtedly saw the conflict as predominantly Serbian-driven (Gow 1997), but the team of Bush Snr. assigned considerable responsibility to secessionist republics and their actions as well (Binder 1991). In this sense, as Warren Zimmermann wrote, the major culprits were the leaders of Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia together, although Milošević was singled out as the driving force of the war (Zimmermann 1996). After the start of hostilities, the US became something of an ‘accomplice’, with a reserved attitude, at that, to the European diplomatic engagement realized in the creation of a number of institutions (bodies) and mechanisms for

⁶ Glaurdic in his book pointed to this problematic issue by claiming that the West remained committed to a united SFRY in the late 1980s and the very beginning of the 1990s in spite of Milošević’s increasingly destabilizing role. In that respect, Glaurdic heavily criticized this Western attitude. Moreover, once Milošević lost his favorable position with the West, Tudjman, whose extremist views should be kept in mind when his role is analyzed, filled this empty spot. See Glaurdic 2011.

taming the Yugoslav crisis.⁷ Here, it is important to underline that the EC's approach to SFRY in dissolution also exhibited considerable differences – most notably between the perspective of a newly united Germany with a very vigorous foreign policy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the views of France and the UK, whose approach was far less willing to acknowledge the dissolution of the joint Yugoslav state (Conversi 1998, Crawford 1996).

Therefore, due to differences among the EC members themselves and aimed towards putting the CFSP framework into practice, European diplomacy was also a specific exercise in a variety of diplomatic initiatives to bring an end to the crisis in ex-SFRY and exemplify leadership with a united front before a reserved Washington. Indeed, the Americans did not completely follow European diplomacy, especially with respect to the declarations of independence of both Slovenia and Croatia in mid-1991 (Binder 1991), early NATO discussions on SFRY (Gow 1997), or the recognition by the EC of Ljubljana and Zagreb as independent capitals in January 1992 (Williams 1992), and Washington chiefly remained committed to its rather cautious approach. Thus, although various initiatives, especially coercive ones - sanctions and an arms embargo - failed during 1991 (Gerstenzang 1991), Washington's unfortunate embrace of a less inventive, "incrementalist" (Lino 2006) and rather reserved approach, where any use of force was ruled out at the very start, continued till 1993. By renouncing forceful means, the US was, much like the Europeans, denying, in all probability, the only effective mode of stopping an escalation of the crisis; thus, both the Europeans and Americans were united in, what Gow referred to in his book, a 'lack of political will' (Gow 1997). Precisely due to fears that the White House would be compelled to engage militarily if it even hinted at such a solution, Washington decided to remain careful in its rhetoric (Gow 1997). Consequently, military engagement was then effectively understood as exercising leadership which the White House wanted to avoid in that particular period. Success in recent global engagements and the need to be a 'partner rather than a leader'

⁷ One of the more contentious issues in the Yugoslav crisis concerns interpretation of contradictory and open-to-speculation clauses in international law, such as the inviolability of international borders and the right of self-determination. In this respect, the Badinter Commission, founded in mid-1991 by the EC in order to provide legal advice on SFRY, concluded on the inviolability of borders according to the **uti possidetis** principle that established former republican borders as future international borders. Furthermore, the Commission also ruled on the self-determination issue, principally the issue of Serbs in Croatia, by stating that Serbian people in Croatia were to enjoy all human and minority rights according to international law. This decision came from a twofold interpretation of the self-determination principle: on the one hand, this principle may be read as the right to sovereignty and political status, and, on the other, as a set of human and minority rights to be enjoyed. Moreover, contention over the Badinter Commission findings did not stop there but continued with issues such as holding elections with single-preference voting systems (increasing ethnic polarization), on the one hand, and, on the other, referendums requiring a double majority (in Parliament and of MPs of that national group) in decision-making processes. Thus, these issues certainly added pressure to the situation in SFRY and had a considerable impact on decisions taken by major domestic actors.

directed Washington onto this road of taking a reserved stand (Walker 1991, Goodby 1993, Duffield 1994/1995). Lastly, after the secessionist republics of Slovenia and Croatia had declared independence, which undercut the whole concept of a united SFRY, Washington was, in fact, left without a policy to solve the problem at hand (Gow 1997). Thus, without any real desire to get entangled too deeply in the Yugoslav disarray, the White House opted for a policy of restraint.

Actually, it was only when BiH became the ultimate theatre of war that Milošević-inspired aggression was eventually seen as the major cause of the war in this republic, yet in spite of this the US did not respond with a more engaged attitude or action. Moreover, even the UN proved incapable of properly responding to the problems in BiH, for the UN had not concluded the conflict between Zagreb and the Croatian Serbs and effectively allowed JNA forces to be relocated over the border in BiH. As the first attempt to salvage BiH through the Carrington-Cutileiro plan (the Lisbon Agreement) was rejected in the early months of 1992 by the Muslim side,⁸ the war started and Washington was accused of intentionally torpedoing the plan.⁹ Although reports of atrocities (Lewis 1992), concentration camps, mass executions, systematic rape,¹⁰ and ethnic cleansing (mainly committed by Serbian forces in BiH) spread swiftly, the White House still remained largely aloof. With both Washington and Europe opposed to any military engagement (Toronto Star 1992, New York Times News Service, St. Louis Post – Dispatch 1992, Gordon 1992), the combatants, feeling the pulse of the major international actors, were unintentionally permitted to continue the military struggle (Woodward 1995). Notions of a Bosnian quagmire (Powell 1992), coupled with a reluctance to lead in the new international setting, rendered the Bush Snr. administration useless – and especially with the domestic agenda increasingly being the focus of electoral rhetoric. The President spent his last days in office being criticized by Clinton, the Presidential Candidate for the Democrats, for not taking a stand, by

⁸ This plan de facto reflected increasing ethnic polarization and the division of BiH whose president, Alija Izetbegović, strongly advocated a united, multi-ethnic state of BiH.

⁹ The first attempt to salvage BiH, the Lisbon plan, resulted from EC efforts in early 1992 to prevent conflict by constitutional arrangements based on three separate autonomous regions, with ethnic power-sharing on administrative levels, in a confederative BiH. Although Muslims resentfully accepted the confederation with Serbs and Croats, frustrated over receiving less territory than they had wanted, the ethnic groups agreed to accept the plan. Eventually, the plan was dismissed by President Izetbegović, supposedly due to pressure from Zimmermann. However, if Zimmermann's personal account is analyzed, the only exchange between the two appeared to include suggestions rather than implicit threats made by the US Ambassador. Regardless of this, many authors take Zimmermann's attitude to be highly conducive to Izetbegović's ultimate rejection, thus forgetting that Serbs had very little incentive, if any, to respect the peace plan. Warren Zimmermann, for that matter, rejected allegations that he had encouraged the Bosnian President to reject the plan. In spite of this, certain authors such as, for example, Gibbs, claim otherwise. See "Bosnian About-Face," 1993, and Gibbs 2009.

¹⁰ A detailed account of the nationalist ideologies of the Yugoslav peoples and the policy of genocide in the Yugoslav war is presented in Denich 1994. Also see Bloor 1994.

force if need be, in BiH. However, it actually turned out that, for all the criticism directed towards the Bush Snr. camp during the election campaign, Clinton's policy in BiH proved to be inconsistent and often changed its objectives.

3. Clinton's Odyssey in BiH

With very sharp rhetoric, as is rather typical for Presidential Candidates, Clinton's domestic economic agenda and overtly simplistic view of the conflict in SFRY¹¹ dragged the Administration to the point where doubts were raised if BiH could altogether be saved (Binder 1993, Devroy and Smith 1993). For an Administration that saw domestic issues as primary in its program and that lacked confidence in gaining the support of public opinion (Bert 1997), the disparity between 'preaching and practicing', in the Bosnian case specifically, loomed large and significantly contributed to the (common) feeling that resolving the Bosnian conflict might indeed prove too much for the Clinton Administration. Moreover, it seemed that Clinton's team was somewhat initially bewildered after having confronted the issue of BiH (Bert 1997); thus, it needed time to muster enough composure to find its way in the ex-Yugoslav conundrum.

Coupled with the Administration's simplistic views on both the causes and aspects of the war,¹² Washington's discontent with the Vance-Owen Peace (VOPP) initiative (Owen 1995) actually meant that the Administration rejected a plan that could have stopped the Bosnian conflict in early 1993. Instead, the Administration argued that the 'lift and strike' policy- lifting the UN arms embargo for the Bosnian Muslims and using force against the Bosnian Serbs - should be introduced as an effective measure instead (Burg and Shoup 2000). For that matter, largely pro-interventionist figures in the Clinton team favored the 'lift and strike' option, for they saw it as an effective tool both in terms of aerial assault and additionally as an excuse for not employing ground troops (Gow 1997). Nevertheless, this policy became highly resented both by the European Allies, as it obviously endangered their forces on the ground by making them vulnerable to Serbian retaliation and possibly inciting an even larger war, and non-interventionists in the US Army (such was, for example, Collin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), who adamantly refused to engage militarily (Gibbs 2009). In this respect, the gap between

¹¹ Clinton is reported to have read and been largely influenced by Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*. See Gow 1997.

¹² The Yugoslav conflict is not easily fitted into conventional war theory and its complex nature had a decisive impact upon future peace solutions. It is, therefore, understandable that the US Administration experienced great difficulties in dealing with Yugoslavia. The most comprehensive account of all operations in the Yugoslav wars is presented in CIA 2002.

Washington, seeking an appropriate policy (Binder and Crossette 1993), and Europe, resentful of Washington's prior and current moves, remained significant during 1993 (Cohen 1993).

However, American rejection of VOPP, arising from both ethical and political considerations by the Clinton Administration, not only raised negative voices in Europe, but also added strain to relations with the Allies, especially over the issue of the safety of international troops in BiH. By dismissing the VOPP as chiefly endorsing Serbian ethnic cleansing and aggression (Ferguson 1993), the Clinton Administration effectively rejected a plan for a multi-ethnic, decentralized BiH partitioned into ten different and largely autonomous cantons with Sarajevo granted special status (Owen 1995). The ratio of territorial division was set at Serbs 43%, Croats 32% and Muslims 25%. Moreover, the plan also envisaged the return of refugees, international peace-keeping with NATO at its core, and demilitarization, but the US raised concerns over the unenforceability of the plan as well as unfair territorial division (Gibbs 2009). Lastly, Washington's repudiation at this particular moment came exactly due to the inconsistency between the principles of rebuking ethnic aggression and cleansing, and the particular situation on the ground. Indeed, White House policy was constantly shifting between the mutually contradictory requisites of both principles and practice. Opting for principles that, regardless of their value *per se*, were exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, to enforce by the means the White House had already chosen, namely the 'lift and strike' policy, Washington allowed the war to continue rather than deploy its own troops to stop it (Gibbs 2009). BiH did not, meanwhile, witness a typical ethnically-driven conflict with clear frontlines, as the Administration largely saw it (or perhaps wanted to see it); thus, any tangible policy for BiH had to acknowledge the hybrid nature of the war. Nominally the war included three warring sides, however in an atmosphere of constantly changing alliances, with the Croat-Muslim war (which erupted in South-Western BiH in early 1993 and lasted for almost a year) in full swing, with a specific clandestine economy (Andreas 2004) that often brought the warring parties together, and with an often hectic situation on the ground confronting international forces, Clinton in his Bosnian odyssey had to gradually reduce friction between principles and practice. In this respect, the Dayton Agreement allocating Serbs with 49% of Bosnian territory, regardless of other provisions, actually unintentionally instituted, at least partially, the results of the ethnic cleansing that VOPP had tried to diminish earlier on (Gow 1997, Owen 1995).

Meanwhile, relations with the European Allies, weakened by the American stance on the Bosnian war and put under further strain by fears of the ‘lift and strike’ approach, did not actually improve till the beginning of 1994. European diplomatic resentment, chiefly underlining Washington’s unconstructive attitude, meant a gradual European withdrawal from peace initiatives, which was also a reaction to the failure of peace initiatives pursued in mid and late 1993: the ‘Union of the Republics’ and the HMS *Invincible* *Acquis*. However, in spite of differences between the major international actors, this phase of the conflict also revealed that the means of coercion gradually entered discussions in major Western diplomatic circles (Mearsheimer 1993), especially in the context of ‘safe areas’,¹³ where the civilian population was supposed to be protected (Pomfret and Claiborne 1993, Lewis 1993, Pomfret 1993). Moreover, John Shalikashvili assuming the position of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1993 meant that the US Army was now more receptive to employing coercive measures in the crisis (Burg and Shoup 2000). Thus, it was the start of 1994 that brought a more engaged Washington back to the scene. This was largely because of the February bombing of a local Sarajevo market, which brought about profound change in the international community’s response (Binder 1994, Jackson 1994). With Washington¹⁴ more assertive, the creation of the Contact Group (which also included Moscow aiming to improve its international image and engage in its favorite ‘major power game’) (Headley 2008) in April was followed by the increasingly active role (Perle and Burt 1994) of NATO in enforcing the ‘no-fly’ zone (NFZ) over BiH (Pick 1992, Kifner 1993). Lastly, 1994 was the year of a major break-through: the signing of the Federation Agreement between Muslims and Croats in March (Glenny 1994, AP 1994) under considerable pressure from Washington and with substantial German leverage. Bearing in mind that this Agreement ended the clashes that threatened future peace and undermined US involvement in the republic in general, it was critical for any further American success in BiH (Holbrooke 1999). Moreover, this move also enabled Washington to use the newly created Federation, secretly armed with Washington’s knowledge and acquiescence (Traynor and

¹³ A policy introduced in mid-1993 by the UN when six safe havens for Bosnian Muslims were created. These areas were: Sarajevo, Žepa, Srebrenica, Goražde, Tuzla, and Bihać.

¹⁴ President Clinton defended the US policy in BiH and asserted that simplistic ideas and solutions, however appropriate they might seem, could not be easily applied to this very complicated conflict. This was probably Clinton’s apologetic stance concerning his Administration’s problems in tackling the crisis. See Devroy, Ann. President Cautions Congress on ‘Simplistic Ideas’ in Foreign Policy, *The Washington Post* (pre-1997 Fulltext) [Washington, D.C], 26 May 1994: pp. A31. A concise analysis of the US foreign policy of Clinton’s administration is given in Kristol, Irving (Board of Contributors): A Post-Wilsonian Foreign Policy, *Wall Street Journal* [New York, N.Y.], 02 Aug 1996: pp. A14.

Freedland 1994), as an important point of leverage against the Bosnian Serbs in concluding peace in 1995.

However, regardless of significant advances during the previous year, it was in 1995 that Washington actually managed to crack the Bosnian nut and finally ‘end a war’ (Holbrooke 1999). This happened for several reasons. First, conditions previously created in the international arena allowed the White House to resume leadership. Thus, Washington was supported by the Europeans in resolutely backing diplomacy with force, thereby stepping up to fulfill its major international role (The Economist 1995). Taking into account that the Rapid Reaction Force (Holbrooke 1999) had previously been established as a robust response to any further Serbian aggression and that NATO took more of an active role, the US came closer to the point of accepting that it might be asked to deploy its forces in order to ensure a future peace settlement.

Thus, the US came to the position of accepting the option of countering the Bosnian Serbs militarily, for no other solution, except for a rather unthinkable pull out by British and French forces, which were the backbone of the UN in BiH, actually existed. Second, personnel changes in the US Army with Collin Powell being replaced by General John Shalikashvili as Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in October 1993 (Burg and Shoup 2000) meant that a more pro-interventionist stance was gradually accepted in army circles. Third, the President of Serbia, Slobodan Milošević, hoping to re-establish himself as a key player in the region and trying to alleviate international sanctions imposed on his country, assumed a more moderate stance after having unsuccessfully pleaded with the Bosnian Serb leadership to be more receptive to the Western diplomatic initiatives led by the US (Pomfret 1994). Fourth, the Bosnian Serb summer attacks of 1995 that overran two safe areas and led to genocide (the massacre at Srebrenica by the Bosnian Serb Army led by General Ratko Mladić, whose actions were partly a response to Operation Flash, in which the Croats captured Western Slavonia in May 1995) only strengthened the pro-interventionist stance in the Clinton Administration. Furthermore, when another mortar shell hit a Sarajevo market in late summer that year, NATO responded with over-whelming force against Bosnian Serb positions, finally putting its threats into practice (The Independent 1995, The Economist 1995). With the Serbs being targeted by NATO (Black, Palmer, and Vulliamy 1995), with North-Western BiH threatened by a combined Muslim-Croat offensive (for example, Operation Storm, which resulted in the single largest exodus of the war, and which was largely facilitated by the US, both logistically and in terms of military training and equipment), and with the fear of losing both territory and further political support from Belgrade (Pomfret 1995) coupled with rejection by the international community, the Bosnian Serbs acquiesced. Fifth, the

Dayton plan (also known as the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH and Herzegovina or the Dayton Accords) was easily implementable, certainly far easier to implement than the VOPP, although it should be made clear that both domestic and international factors changed over time: international forces grew more robust while Serbian forces grew weaker, and, internationally, the White House was seen as the focal point of concerted international efforts concerning BiH (Gow 1997). Lastly, the US diplomatic initiative, exemplified by Richard Holbrooke's 'shuttle diplomacy,' illustrated that Clinton's Administration had, although after considerable hardship, actually learned its Balkan lesson and transformed itself from a 'confused' spectator of Yugoslav chaos into an able contributor to the conflict's resolution. The Administration managed to diminish the gap between its rhetoric and its actions and, moreover, had to accept, albeit with great hesitation as was previously shown, the leadership position, which, in fact, meant using force to stabilize BiH. This very fact would be proven in the last Yugoslav engagement that solidified the Administration's interventionist stance: Operation Allied Force.

4. Intervention in Kosovo: Operation Allied Force

The conflict in Kosovo did not originate in the late 1990s nor can it be solely attributed to nationalist policies (Vickers 1998, Judah 2008) employed by Slobodan Milošević (Loyd 1999), who actually started his rise in Kosovo back in 1987.¹⁵ Rather, it was a specific product of both domestic and international circumstances concerning the whole experience of Yugoslav dissolution. The conflict happened at a time when the international community, most specifically represented by Western democracies, was becoming increasingly oriented towards establishing the human rights agenda as an intrinsic component of modern international relations, thus putting the issue of values above particular state interests (speech by Vaclav Havel in 1999). Moreover, the Kosovo conflict seen through the Yugoslav lens of the 1990s further alarmed the international community into acting, first diplomatically and then militarily (Blechman and Wittes 1999), first and foremost because of fears of 'spill-over' that threatened to inflame a region already suffering under the considerable strain of the past (Emmert 1993, Zimmermann 1998). Lastly, the conflict divided the international community in terms of the support (Daalder and

¹⁵ The roots of the Kosovo problem should not be in any way assigned solely to the Serbian political leadership of the 1990s. This is simply because, in spite of the fact that the leadership implemented fundamentally wrong policies towards the Kosovo Albanian majority and thus undermined any future political solution for the province, antagonisms between Serbs and Albanians and their claims to Kosovo had much broader historical roots. See Ramet 2002.

O'Hanlon 2000, Steinberg 1999) or rejection (Mccgwire 2000, Gibbs 2001, Rieff 2006, Layne 1999, Chomsky 2008) of both the NATO campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and the later independence of the former Serbian province, but it did not significantly destabilize international relations as such.

Based on a human rights agenda that became the focal point of US-Yugoslav relations in the late 1980s and the prominent 'Christmas warning' of 1992, when Belgrade was warned by the White House not to resort to force in Kosovo (The Vancouver Sun 1992), Washington's response to increasing tensions in the province in 1997 and 1998 was rather quick. In view of the fact that Milošević's policies in Kosovo were mostly focused on keeping a tight grip on the provincial Albanian majority and that Albanian dissatisfaction had grown when the Dayton Accords failed to address the Kosovo issue, the situation in the province was about to take an increasingly violent turn. Washington was swift to recognize the crisis as a growing regional security problem (Albright 1998), and it employed diplomatic means to resolve it with Richard Holbrooke, the champion peacemaker of BiH, being appointed the head envoy for Kosovo.

Although diplomacy backed by force worked during 1998, most notably with Holbrooke obtaining from Milošević the October Agreement (Walker and Norton-Taylor 1998), which was supposed to ease the tensions in Kosovo, this proved only to be a lull before the storm of 1999, when the diplomatic failure of Rambouillet (BBC 1999) led to Operation Allied Force. Second, Washington's Balkan experience chiefly influenced the Administration towards favoring punitive actions (Erlanger 1998) against Belgrade if Milošević proved non-compliant. Washington first acted diplomatically,¹⁶ for example via the UN and in line with its European Allies, but also threatened to 'use the stick' in the form of NATO as a means of coercion from then on.¹⁷ This actually meant that the US had to balance its policy oscillating between not supporting the Kosovo Liberation Army's (UÇK in Albanian language) cause of outright independence (or not being seen as a sponsor of such) and coercing the Serbian authorities, regardless of their

¹⁶ For example, the successful diplomatic engagement of primarily the EU, but with considerable American involvement, managed to defuse the crisis in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in 2001, when Albanian insurrection threatened to completely destabilize the country and possibly create another regional problem. However, both the Macedonian government and the international community succeeded in resolving this issue in cooperation with each other, and thus the Ohrid Agreement of 2001 allowed peaceful reconciliation to take place in FYROM. Furthermore, the agreement facilitated the participation of FYROM in the Euro-Atlantic integration process. See Ramet 2010.

¹⁷ Interestingly, Ivo Daalder, himself part of Clinton's Administration from '95 to '96, fundamentally disagreed with the Administration's policy in Kosovo at the beginning of the crisis, and he underlined that the Clinton team was repeating mistakes of the past, due to a 'least denominator policy' shared with the Allies, by not exercising leadership when necessary and opting for sanctions against Belgrade instead of more aggressive means of coercion. See Daalder 1998.

sovereignty claims over the province, to restrain from further aggressive actions in Kosovo (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2000, Caplan 1998¹⁸). This subtlety proved rather difficult and certainly at times antagonized the Administration in its relations with the Allies, who demanded the following of very clear political objectives if Belgrade was to be coerced in a meaningful and successful way (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2000).

Also, once the diplomatic efforts were exhausted and Operation Allied Force began, Washington had to partly unlearn some of its Bosnian lessons. Opting for a precise, gradual, surgical, and micromanagement-type of action (Zakaria 1999, Mandelbaum 1999) aimed at the most important military installations in Kosovo and then in Serbia proper made the air strikes rather ambitious, especially if pilots were instructed to fly at high altitudes so as to ensure their maximum safety (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2000). Moreover, Kosovo was different to BiH, where Belgrade was successful in manipulating and finally coercing the Bosnian Serbs into following its lead. In Kosovo, Milošević, being on his 'home ground,' had obviously nowhere to retreat.

Finally, US policy became significantly more forceful after NATO's reputation came to be at stake. The possible collective failure of the West over Kosovo was addressed during and after NATO's 50th Anniversary (Sciolino and Bronner 1999), when the US pushed for a complete redefinition of inter-Alliance relations and the formation of a seemingly united front over the issue of the formal assessment of the introduction of ground forces that would see the Serbian security apparatus out of the province and Albanian refugees back to their homes (Ignatief 1999). Thus, both diplomatic efforts and air raids were intensified and widened in order to coerce Belgrade into leaving Kosovo.

However, it is important to note that the intensification of air strikes also meant that NATO resorted to some quite questionable acts – for example, targeting civilian infrastructure (especially with cluster bombs and depleted uranium-enriched ammunition), which left many feeling skeptical about the ways in which NATO prevailed in its engagement against FRY. These were specifically done in order to incite popular discontent with Milošević and allow for his possible removal in Serbia, but, on the other hand, they also led to a more heated public debate about the rift between principle and practice in Western policy. Thus, Washington had to rely on the increasing success of air strikes and the gradual introduction of ground troops, which, although rejected at the beginning of the campaign, now found its way onto the Kosovo agenda

¹⁸ Caplan put it: "to signal support for secession, or at least to indicate a willingness to consider the option, is not to offer succor to secessionists everywhere but to put repressive regimes on notice that the cost of violently suppressing the right to self-determination may be very high." See Caplan 1998.

following both diplomatic and military developments in the Kosovo crisis (Richter 1999, Graham 1999). Lastly, as for diplomacy, the bringing of NATO raids to an end can be largely attributed to the success of the international diplomatic initiatives led by Chernomyrdin and Martti Ahtisaari respectively, who managed to find agreement with Milošević on changes concerning a future political solution for Kosovo by deleting the referendum clause as mentioned in the previously rejected Rambouillet Agreement. In addition, several other factors may also have contributed to the end of the NATO campaign against FRY. Damage to infrastructure caused by the bombing, the KLA's increasing success in fighting the Serbian security forces, a possible NATO ground invasion, and Milošević's indictment before the Hague Tribunal all led to the international protectorate established in Kosovo from June 1999 (Daalder and O'Hanlon 2000).

Thus, to put the situation into perspective, American engagement in Kosovo showed that the Administration acted relatively quickly to address the brewing crisis in Kosovo. This certainly represents a change in approach when the whole experience of American involvement in the region is evaluated, especially if one examines Washington's stance towards the crisis in Socialist Yugoslavia (specifically Slovenia, Croatia, and BiH), where the White House took its time to engage, first diplomatically and then militarily.

Actually, what Kosovo exemplified the best was that only in the case of active diplomatic involvement, or in other words, having the political will to address an issue at its inception, was the US capable of taming the crisis successfully. This does not necessarily mean that in this case the diplomatic initiative had to end in the use of force or that the use of force was the only element in the whole equation, but that the very use of force essentially helped diplomacy resolve this issue properly. In that sense, Washington was poised towards a more pragmatic stance in its interventionist policy and managed, with considerable difficulty, to significantly reduce the gap of the early 1990s between its words and its actions in the Western Balkans.

5. Conclusion

With the Kosovo campaign, the out-going Clinton Administration imbued American foreign policy with a more competent interventionist flavor. Moreover, the NATO operation of 1999, introducing new features of 'humanitarian intervention,' also signaled the American withdrawal from the region, at least in the form that had existed during the troubled decade of the 1990s. The Bush Jnr. administration, due to its different foreign policy goals, largely left the

Western Balkans to Brussels to stabilize it further and eventually incorporate it into the EU. This did not imply that the White House had decided to abruptly cancel its Western Balkans engagement altogether, but that this engagement was to be seriously reduced, as the European Union was gradually taking on a more robust, and increasingly more potent, regional role.

Thus, from the current perspective, Washington's reserved attitude of the early 1990s, when the White House took a cautious stance and employed reserved rhetoric in the last years of the Bush Snr. Administration, was gradually replaced by the more engaged posture of Bill Clinton's team. This shift from the first to the second phase was achieved over time and with substantial difficulty, while Washington's language on the use of force, after both domestic and international dimensions were properly addressed, gradually won the day. Thus, the Clinton Administration, having to strike a balance between domestic concerns and its foreign policy constraints, went through the 'Bosnian quagmire' in order to adjust its statements and principles in line with its actions. In this very process the Administration actually learned to be more pragmatic in its approach to the region and that ultimately deeds and not words count. Only when the political readiness to fully engage, or in other words, to recognize the interest in acting, met international acquiescence, did the US manage to resolve the Bosnian crisis, albeit after considerable difficulties. This was achieved by gradually reducing differences within the international community and, above all, by resuming the leadership position that Washington had been so very hesitant to do in the beginning. With a strong emphasis on the use of force, the US then aimed to find equilibrium between statements and consequent actions. Lastly, the Kosovo crisis, which closed the Yugoslav chapter, proved that the two most important lessons for the White House in ex-Yugoslavia were that, on the one hand, force actually proved highly beneficial in any diplomatic bargaining and, on the other, that diplomatic initiatives needed to be as broad as possible; thus, in general, that no options should be initially excluded. This was, of course, pre-conditioned by, on the one hand, American interests, both global and regional, and, on the other hand, political readiness.

Eventually, it was diplomacy backed by force that saved the day in ex-Yugoslavia and brought peace to the Western Balkans. In this respect, it may be concluded that Washington had an extremely important role in stabilizing the region, which, in spite of the legacy of past troubles, is now more than ever firmly set towards membership of the European Union and certainly a brighter future.

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