

*“The Problem
from Hell”*

WHEN THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION came to office in January 1993, it inherited a U.S.—indeed Western—Bosnia policy that was in complete disarray. The previous year had been witness to the most brutal war in Europe since 1945. It was a war marked by concentration camps, massive expulsions of Muslims and Croats from their homes in a self-described Serb campaign of “ethnic cleansing,” widespread incidents of rape, and the unrelenting shelling of cities, including the capital, Sarajevo—together accounting for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, mostly civilians, and well over a million refugees. The Western response to these atrocities had been to condemn Serb actions and impose a total economic embargo on Serbia and Montenegro to force an end to their involvement in the Bosnian war, to deploy a UN peacekeeping force to protect humanitarian relief supplies being transported to affected communities, and to scurry around to find a diplomatic solution acceptable to the warring sides.

By the time the new administration took office, these international efforts were producing limited results. The embargo succeeded in devastating the economies of Serbia and Montenegro, although not in ending Belgrade’s support for Bosnian and Croatian Serbs. A United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) of nearly 9,000 troops was deployed in February 1993 to protect the relief effort, which reached millions of people and prevented an even worse humanitarian disaster. And the diplomatic effort had produced an intricate plan, dividing Bosnia into ten ethnic majority provinces. Conspicuously lacking, however, was U.S. engagement in—let alone leadership of—the international effort in Bosnia. Having

rejected the use of U.S. (and NATO) military muscle for any purpose in Bosnia, the Bush administration had effectively deferred the design and implementation of Western policy to the Europeans.¹ The Europeans, in turn, had eagerly seized the policy reins—even declaring at the outset that this was “the hour of Europe”²—only soon to realize that the break-up of Yugoslavia represented too large a challenge for them to resolve on their own.³

Presidential candidate Bill Clinton had campaigned vociferously in support of greater U.S. engagement in Bosnia. As the first press reports of Bosnian concentration camps appeared in late July,⁴ the Clinton campaign released a statement in support of air strikes to deter attacks against relief agencies and urged appropriate U.S. military support to the effort.⁵ Weeks later, candidate Clinton went further, suggesting the need to lift the arms embargo against the Bosnian Muslims, an embargo that had been instituted against Yugoslavia as a whole prior to its formal political disintegra-

1. For an overview of the Bush administration’s policy toward the former Yugoslavia, including Bosnia, see James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War, and Peace, 1989–1992* (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), pp. 634–51; Mark Danner, “The U.S. and the Yugoslav Catastrophe,” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 44 (November 20, 1997), pp. 56–64; Mark Danner, “America and the Bosnia Genocide,” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 44 (December 4, 1997), pp. 55–65; David C. Gompert, “The United States and Yugoslavia’s Wars,” in Richard H. Ullman, *The World and Yugoslavia’s Wars* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1996), pp. 122–44; and Warren Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe: Yugoslavia and Its Destroyers—America’s Last Ambassador Tells What Happened and Why* (Times Books, 1996).

2. Cited in Alan Riding, “Europeans Send High-Level Team,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1991, p. 4.

3. For an overview of these efforts, consult especially Henry Wijnandts, *L’Engrenage; Chroniques Yougoslaves, Juillet 1991–Août 1992* (Paris: Denoël, 1993); James Steinberg, “Yugoslavia,” in Lori Fisler Damrosch, ed., *Enforcing Restraint: Collective Intervention in Internal Conflicts* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993), pp. 27–76; James E. Goodby, “Peacekeeping in the New Europe,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 15 (Spring 1992); Marc Weller, “The International Response to the Dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 86 (1992); and John Newhouse, “The Diplomatic Round: Dodging the Problem,” *The New Yorker*, vol. 68 (August 24, 1992), pp. 60–71.

4. See Roy Gutman, “Prisoners of Serbia’s War; Tales of Hunger, Torture at Camp in North Bosnia,” *Newsday*, July 19, 1992, p. 7.

5. “Statement by Governor Bill Clinton on the Crisis in Bosnia,” July 26, 1992; and E. J. Dionne Jr. and others, “Clinton Turns Sights to Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1992, p. A1.

tion.⁶ Operating in a campaign atmosphere free of the responsibilities of governing, Clinton and his foreign policy advisers had urged a course that would up the ante of U.S. involvement in the Balkans once the new administration took office.

Once in power, however, the Clinton administration failed to back its forceful campaign rhetoric with concrete action. Like his predecessor, President Clinton proved unwilling either to put Bosnia center stage in his foreign policy or to commit the type of military capabilities that would be necessary to bring the conflict to a halt. That left the administration with the option of trying to persuade its allies—notably Great Britain and France, which had substantial numbers of troops on the ground to protect the humanitarian effort—to endorse forceful military action. As was to be expected, the allies consistently rejected any effort that would either escalate the fighting (as lifting the arms embargo surely would) or increase the risk to their troops (as one-sided air strikes threatened to do). Instead, the allies predicated their endorsement of the use of force—notably air power—on the United States accepting equivalent risks by deploying American forces alongside European troops. This, the Clinton administration consistently refused.

For two years the Clinton administration tried various ways to escape the dilemma created by this situation. In the process, relations with key allied countries significantly deteriorated. By late 1994, differences over how to respond to a Bosnian Serb assault on the UN-declared "safe area" around the northwestern Bosnian city of Bihac reached crisis proportions. While the United States insisted that the defense of this area required large-scale air strikes, London and Paris warned that they would pull out their troops from Bosnia altogether if Washington insisted on bombing Serb forces. In the face of a transatlantic crisis on a par with the one the Atlantic alliance had last witnessed over the Suez Canal in 1956 and fearing that NATO itself could be torn asunder by disagreement over Bosnia, the administration switched course. It opted for a policy of containment, designed to ensure that developments inside Bosnia would not spread beyond that unfortunate country's borders. Like its predecessor, moreover, the Clinton administration once again acceded to allied policy preferences. The push for bombing was shelved, the preferred European diplomatic framework of working through Belgrade to get a resolution of the conflict

6. See Michael Kelly, "Surrender and Blame," *The New Yorker*, vol. 70 (December 19, 1994), p. 47.

in Bosnia was endorsed, and the de facto (though not de jure) partition of Bosnia between Bosnian Muslims and Croats on the one hand and Bosnian Serbs on the other was accepted as a reality. To those in the administration who had fought consistently for a more activist policy (including the use of significant force), acceptance of European policy preferences represented a bitter defeat, leaving some (such as Madeleine K. Albright, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations) dejected and others (including National Security Adviser W. Anthony [Tony] Lake) contemplating resignation. In the end, they stayed on, only to lead the effort to forge a new U.S. policy direction—one that ultimately would end the war. That success, however, would be built on more than two bitter years of failure.

Presidential Review Directive

One of President Clinton's first official acts was to ask his national security team to review U.S. policy toward the Balkans. This, the first in a series of presidential review directives (PRDs) directing a reassessment of U.S. foreign policy, called for "a comprehensive, wall-to-wall approach" toward evaluating the situation in Bosnia.⁷ Reflecting previous campaign rhetoric, PRD-1 asked a series of probing questions of the State and Defense Departments and the Central Intelligence Agency in order to stimulate serious consideration of more activist U.S. policy options, including those that had long been rejected by the Bush administration. Among the options to be considered were:

- Using air power to enforce the "no-fly zone" over Bosnia that the UN had declared in October 1992;
- Engaging in air strikes against Serb artillery positions and airfields;
- Altering the UN arms embargo to allow the Bosnian Muslims to obtain more weapons;
- Establishing UN peacekeeping operations in Macedonia and Kosovo to prevent the further spread of conflict in the region; and
- Creating an international war crimes commission to investigate reports of atrocities.⁸

Clinton's senior foreign policy advisers formally met for the first time as the Principals Committee (PC) on January 28, 1993, to review the ini-

7. John M. Goshko and Don Oberdorfer, "U.S. to Study Wider Options on Balkans," *Washington Post*, January 28, 1993, p. A16.

8. *Ibid.*

tial results of the presidential review. Attending this and subsequent PC meetings were National Security Adviser Anthony Lake, who chaired the meetings, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright, Director of Central Intelligence R. James Woolsey, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, the only holdover from the previous administration. As was to become a pattern for PC meetings on Bosnia in the months to come, many issues were raised, discussed, and debated during this first meeting, but little was decided.⁹ Upon emerging from the meeting, Secretary Christopher told reporters that “a very wide range of options” was under consideration, suggesting no decisions were near.¹⁰

At the end of the third PC meeting on Bosnia on February 5, Lake invited President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore to join their senior advisers. Clinton made clear that the United States had to lead. “If the United States doesn’t act in situations like this, nothing will happen.” As if to underscore the point, Clinton stressed that a “failure to do so would be to give up American leadership.”¹¹ To provide that leadership, Clinton agreed that the United States would:

—Support efforts to find a political solution by working closely with key allies, particularly with Russia, and appointing a special U.S. envoy to participate in negotiations;

—Reject imposing a settlement that was not voluntarily accepted by all parties;

—Contribute directly to humanitarian relief efforts by taking additional measures to facilitate the delivery of aid (such as air-dropping food from U.S. military transport aircraft);

—Enforce the no-fly zone as an effort to forestall further bloodshed;

—Tighten sanctions on Serbia, repeat the Bush administration warning against disruptive action in Kosovo, and strengthen the international presence in Macedonia to discourage the further spread of conflict; and

9. A somewhat disbelieving Colin Powell, who as President Reagan’s last national security adviser had chaired his share of similar meetings, later commented that “discussions continued to meander like graduate-student bull sessions or the think-tank seminars in which many of my new colleagues had spent the last twelve years while their party was out of power.” Colin L. Powell, with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (Random House, 1995), p. 576.

10. Don Oberdorfer, “U.S. Reviews Deteriorating Situation in the Balkans,” *Washington Post*, January 29, 1993, p. A19.

11. Cited in Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency* (Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 146.

—Offer U.S. troops to help implement and enforce a peace agreement that was acceptable to all parties.¹²

The results of the policy review, which were made public by Secretary Christopher on February 10, were notable in two respects.¹³ First, there was a noticeable mismatch between the rhetoric of the policy announcement and its content. Christopher's rhetoric was strong: "Bold tyrants and fearful minorities are watching to see whether 'ethnic cleansing' is a policy the world will tolerate. . . . [Our] answer must be a resounding no."¹⁴ Yet there was no mention of the kind of military measures the Clinton campaign had championed just months earlier. To the consternation of some but the contentment of others (notably the European allies, who greeted the new policy with a heavy sigh of relief),¹⁵ neither air strikes nor the lifting of the arms embargo was mentioned. Instead, Christopher emphasized the limits of America's engagement: under no circumstances short of a comprehensive peace settlement that was voluntarily accepted by all the parties would U.S. ground troops be deployed to Bosnia.

Second, although the administration did not say so openly, the new policy conveyed a notable reluctance to support the diplomatic approach then on the table. Known as the Vance-Owen Peace Plan—after the UN and EU mediators, Cyrus Vance and David Owen—this plan sought to balance the competing desires for ethnic autonomy and Bosnia's territorial unity by dividing Bosnia on a geographic and ethnic basis into ten semi-autonomous districts.¹⁶ In the days leading up to Christopher's announcement, the new administration had been highly critical of the plan,

12. "New Steps toward Conflict Resolution in the Former Yugoslavia," Opening statement by the secretary of state at a news conference, February 10, 1993. Reprinted in *Dispatch*, vol. 4 (February 15, 1993), p. 81.

13. See also Mark Danner, "Clinton, the UN and the Bosnian Disaster," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 44 (December 18, 1997), p. 68.

14. "New Steps toward Conflict Resolution." In his memoirs, Christopher admitted, "this rhetoric proved to be well ahead of our policy." Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy in the New Era* (Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 345.

15. John Darnton, "Europe Welcomes U.S. Policy, Especially the Arms," *New York Times*, February 12, 1993, p. A10.

16. For a detailed description of the plan, see David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1995) pp. 89–149. See also James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 232–48 and 307–15; and Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 189–262.

believing it to be both a reward for ethnic cleansing and largely unenforceable. Indeed, on the very day the administration entered office, the State Department spokesman remarked that the incoming secretary of state had "expressed doubts about whether it can realistically be achieved, whether they can, in fact, find an agreement."¹⁷ This sentiment was reinforced in early February when Christopher met with Vance and Owen in New York. While appreciative of the two negotiators' efforts, Christopher noted his particular concern over the "feasibility, practicality, and enforceability" of the plan.¹⁸ Even President Clinton weighed in, describing the plan as "flawed" and making clear that the United States would not pressure the Muslims into accepting an agreement they would be unwilling to live by on their own.¹⁹

Yet despite this evident lack of enthusiasm for the Vance-Owen plan and notwithstanding considerable doubts about its enforceability, the Clinton administration was reluctant to oppose it altogether. In part, this reflected the fact that the European Union foreign ministers had put the administration in a bind by unequivocally backing it on February 1. In making this announcement, which was arrived at without any prior consultation with Washington, the EU underscored that U.S. rejection of the diplomatic approach would place responsibility for the failure of the peace talks squarely on Washington.²⁰ Thus instead of sponsoring new talks between the parties or formulating a new version of the peace plan, the administration decided to throw its weight behind the peace process. Reginald Bartholomew, a senior and seasoned diplomat, was assigned to assist Vance and Owen in modifying the proposal to better address Muslim concerns. For now, at least, Vance-Owen was the only game in town.

Lift and Strike

Throughout February and March 1993, all international efforts focused on getting Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic to sign on to the Vance-

17. See Elaine Sciolino, "Christopher Leery of Bosnia Accord," *New York Times*, January 22, 1993, p. A1.

18. Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Declines to Back Peace Plan as the Balkan Talks Shift to UN," *New York Times*, February 2, 1993, p. A9.

19. Gwen Ifill, "Clinton and Mulroney Fault Balkan Peace Plan," *New York Times*, February 6, 1993, p. 3; and Thomas Friedman, "U.S. Will Not Push Muslims to Accept Bosnia Peace Plan," *New York Times*, February 4, 1993, p. A1.

20. John Newhouse, "No Exit, No Entrance," *The New Yorker*, vol. 69 (June 23, 1993), p. 46.

Owen plan. The strategy was to get the Bosnian Muslims and Croats on board, and then pressure the Bosnian Serbs, with the hope that the Serbs' growing international isolation would force them into accepting the plan. By mid-March however, it was clear that this strategy would not work without additional forms of pressure. Whereas the Muslims appeared to be ready to accept Vance-Owen as a result of U.S. pressure, the Serbs continued to stonewall any peace effort and remained intent on achieving their objectives through the use of force. On March 18, the Bosnian Serbs launched an assault on the predominantly Muslim enclave of Srebrenica; the resulting carnage was shown on televisions around the globe courtesy of CNN. As the events taking place in Srebrenica came into focus and negotiations dragged on, there was growing concern in the United States that the opportunity for reaching a political agreement was slipping away. For many in the administration—especially Al Gore, Tony Lake, and Madeleine Albright—something new was needed if they hoped to bring the Serbs to the table.

On March 25, Lake called a Principals Committee meeting to discuss the situation in Srebrenica and urge his colleagues to come up with new ideas.²¹ The Muslims and Croats had just that day signed the Vance-Owen plan. Lake was looking for ways to end the Serb offensive and persuade the Bosnian Serbs—who were headquartered just outside of Sarajevo in the ski resort of Pale, site of the 1984 Olympic ski competitions—to sign the peace agreement. Two options quickly emerged. One was to increase military pressure against the Bosnian Serbs—by lifting the arms embargo, by using U.S. and NATO air strikes, or by a combination of both. The other was to try to get a cease-fire in place and to offer some form of protection for Muslim enclaves, like Srebrenica, that were under Bosnian Serb assault.

Neither option was without its problems. The cease-fire option, strongly favored by Aspin and the rest of the Pentagon, offered a way to get Bosnia out of the headlines and the issue off the president's desk, but at the cost of accepting what Clinton had opposed during the campaign and what most in the administration would view as a moral calamity at best and a strategic defeat at worst. The option to increase military pressure also was problematic. For one, the allies had rejected any entreaties to use force, which would increase the risk to their own troops that were deployed in Bosnia

21. This and subsequent meetings are described in detail in Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 148–56. See also Newhouse, "No Exit, No Entrance," pp. 46–50.

as part of the UN operation protecting humanitarian relief efforts. Since Clinton rejected a unilateral U.S. military intervention for fear that Bosnia would then become an American responsibility, the allied position was crucial. For another, there were questions about the effectiveness of each option. It was possible that lifting the arms embargo would provoke a massive Serb offensive that might devastate the Muslims before they had a chance to rearm. Meanwhile, the military and intelligence assessments of what air power alone could achieve were far from optimistic. There would be few lucrative targets after the initial bombing run. And while the air force (including its chief of staff) believed that air power alone could bring the Bosnian Serbs to their knees, others in the U.S. military (including Joint Chiefs of Staff chair General Powell and NATO supreme commander General John Shalikashvili, who would soon succeed Powell) strongly argued that substantial ground forces would be necessary to exploit the opening provided by air strikes.²²

Throughout April, the principals met several times with and without the president to discuss the pros and cons of these options, but nothing was decided.²³ The administration was divided internally, with Gore and Albright strongly favoring air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs (and Albright arguing the United States should do so unilaterally if necessary); Aspin supporting at most limited protection of the Muslim enclaves; and Lake and Christopher championing a lifting of the arms embargo against the Bosnian government and limited air strikes during the transition period.²⁴ In the absence of a consensus among his advisers—or even majority support for a single option—Clinton deferred a final decision on what to do. As one high-level official noted, the delay was a “bad sign” and the end-

22. See Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 149, 154; Daniel Williams, “White House Defers Action on Balkans for Several Days,” *Washington Post*, April 21, 1993, p. A26; Elaine Sciolino, “U.S. Military Split on Using Air Power against the Serbs,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1993, pp. A1, A6; and Carroll Doherty, “Voices of Restraint Grow Louder amid Cries for Military Action,” *Congressional Quarterly*, May 1, 1993, p. 1094.

23. Several multilateral steps were taken in an attempt to obtain Bosnian Serb cooperation, including NATO’s decision on April 12 to begin enforcing the no-fly zone; the designation of Srebrenica as a “safe area” by the UN Security Council, a status that would later be extended to five other Muslim enclaves; and approval by the Security Council of a sanctions package that threatened to isolate Belgrade completely if the Pale Serbs had not signed the Vance-Owen plan by April 26.

24. Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 149–55. For Albright’s views, see also Michael R. Gordon, “12 in State Dept. Ask Military Move against the Serbs,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1993, pp. A1, A12.

less meetings had little to do with policymaking. "It was group therapy—an existential debate over what is the role of America, etc."²⁵

At the same time, pressure mounted on the administration to do something. By the middle of April, the Serb assault threatened to topple Srebrenica. Influential members in Congress, such as Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.), were becoming more vocal, calling for direct military action against the Serbs.²⁶ And on April 23, a letter to Secretary Christopher signed by several State Department Balkan specialists calling on the administration to intervene militarily was leaked to the *New York Times*.²⁷ The administration responded with heightened rhetoric, and a policy shift appeared imminent. Already in a televised interview in late March, Clinton had hinted at the possibility of lifting the arms embargo if the Bosnian Serbs did not sign on to Vance-Owen, a position reinforced by Clinton and other administration officials in the days that followed.²⁸ As the situation in Srebrenica deteriorated, the president's rhetoric went further. At a press conference on April 16, Clinton noted that "At this point, I would not rule out any option except the option I have never ruled in, which was the question of American ground troops." When asked whether the time had come to convince the Europeans to lift the arms embargo and conduct air strikes, Clinton responded, "I think the time has come for the United States and Europe to look very honestly at where we are and what our options are and what the consequences of various courses of action will be. And I think we have to consider things which at least previously have been unacceptable."²⁹

It would take another two weeks for Clinton to make up his mind, even though lengthy principals' meetings over the weekend of April 17–18 had narrowed the options to two. The first, "lift and strike," was to lift the arms embargo and threaten air strikes if the Bosnian Serbs tried to take

25. Quoted in Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 150.

26. Elaine Sciolino, "In Congress, Urgent Calls for Action against Serbs," *New York Times*, April 20, 1993, p. A9.

27. Gordon, "12 in State Dept. Ask Military Move against the Serbs."

28. See Steven A. Holmes, "U.S. Presses Serbs by Hinting at End of Arms Embargo on Bosnia," *New York Times*, March 26, 1993, p. A13; and John Goshko and Daniel Williams, "U.S. to Urge Serbs to Sign Bosnia Pact; Clinton Promises 'Full-Court Press,'" *Washington Post*, March 27, 1993, p. A13.

29. "Remarks by the President and [Japanese] Prime Minister [Kilchi] Miyazawa in Joint Press Availability" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, April 16, 1993).

advantage of their fleeting military superiority. The second option consisted of a cease-fire and protection of Muslim enclaves.³⁰ The president finally committed to making a decision on May 1, when he met with his chief advisers for five hours. All options (except U.S. ground troops) were once again debated. In the end, Clinton opted for lift and strike, the option that by then had the support of all his senior advisers with the exception of Aspin, who continued to favor a cease-fire and protection of Muslim enclaves. Even Powell supported lift and strike, believing that once armed and trained, Muslim forces on the ground would improve the effectiveness of air power.

The president and his foreign policy team opted for lift and strike notwithstanding indications from the Europeans suggesting that they would resist any proposal to lift the arms embargo.³¹ They surmised that with the public outrage accompanying the assault on Srebrenica and the refusal by the Bosnian Serbs to accept Vance-Owen before the UN-mandated deadline of April 26, attitudes among the allies might change enough to permit a more aggressive policy. But everyone knew it would be a hard sell. The president assigned Christopher the unenviable task of talking to the allies, telling him, “You’ve been a great lawyer and advocate all these years—now you’ve really got your work cut out for you.”³²

Christopher departed the night of May 1 for London, Paris, Moscow, Brussels, Bonn, and Rome. His assignment was to sound out allied support for lift and strike, but he was not to negotiate over the policy or pressure them into going along. As Christopher recalls, “we decided not to frame the president’s plan as a *fait accompli*. My instructions were to take a more conciliatory approach, laying the proposal before our allies, describing it as the only complete option on the table, and asking for their support.”³³ Thus at each stop, Christopher began his presentation by providing an overview of how the administration had arrived at its decision, including the options that had been considered (a large-scale air campaign, lifting the arms embargo, air strikes in defense of Muslim enclaves, and lift and strike). He would note that there were “no good options” for dealing with Bosnia, but that lift and strike was the “least worst” among

30. Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 151.

31. See Roger Cohen, “U.S. and Allies Differ on Arms for Bosnia Muslims,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1993, p. A15; and William Drozdiak, “European Allies Hurry Up and Wait on Action in Bosnia,” *Washington Post*, April 27, 1993, p. A12.

32. Quoted in Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 156.

33. Christopher, *In the Stream of History*, p. 346.

them.³⁴ The tone of the secretary of state's presentation reflected the long internal discussions and bore the unmistakable imprint of General Powell, notably in denigrating the effectiveness of air power and other limited forms of military force. Christopher stressed that lift and strike could not change the course of the war; its aim was the more limited one of convincing the Serbs to sign Vance-Owen.³⁵

Christopher's presentation was hardly convincing. The Bosnian Serbs had taken much of the wind out of Christopher's sails by announcing just as his plane landed in London that they would sign the Vance-Owen plan on the condition that the Bosnian Serb parliament and people would agree. Although everyone realized that this announcement was a tactical ploy (as became clear when the plan was in effect rejected in a referendum on May 15–16), it provided the allies an excuse to hold off supporting, if not rejecting, the U.S. proposal.³⁶ Christopher's nuanced, lawyerly presentation constituted a highly unusual way for a U.S. secretary of state to make a major policy presentation. Normally, these presentations, while couched in the language of consultation, are direct and to the point: "American policy is X, and we thank you for your support." Christopher's self-described "conciliatory approach"—consisting of talking points that, at least in Whitehall, started with the phrase, "I am here in a listening mode"—differed so completely from the prevailing norm that the allies could not believe that the administration was serious.³⁷ Indeed, London and Paris were as distraught over the fact that the Clinton administration was not really willing to take the promised lead of the West's Bosnia policy as they were over Washington's decision to propose a course of action they had explicitly and repeatedly rejected.³⁸

34. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997.

35. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997. See also Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 155–57; and Newhouse, "No Exit, No Entrance," p. 49.

36. On the impact of the Bosnian Serb announcement, see Sidney Blumenthal, "Lonesome Hawk," *New Yorker*, vol. 69 (May 31, 1993), p. 39.

37. Quotation in Martin Walker, *The President We Deserve: His Rise, Falls, and Comebacks* (Crown Publishers, 1996), p. 265.

38. In Brussels, NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner, a forceful advocate of NATO military intervention in Bosnia, had arisen from his sickbed to lend his strong support to Christopher. Wörner suggested that Christopher go first and make his pitch for lift and strike to the NATO ambassadors and that he would then back him up before anyone else had a chance to say something. Christopher rejected the suggestion, saying, "I prefer to have my bilateral meetings first." Cited in Walker, *The President We Deserve*, p. 265. See also William Safire, "Who's Got Clout?" *New York Times Magazine*, June 20, 1993, p. 34.

Of course, the allies were right. Washington was not ready to push the issue to its logical conclusion for fear that Bosnia would then become America’s problem. As one top policymaker confided, “The basic strategy was, This thing is a no-winner, it’s going to be a quagmire. Let’s not make it our quagmire. That’s what lift the arms embargo, and the limited air strikes, was about.”³⁹ Moreover, even while Christopher was traveling around Europe, it became clear that the president himself had reservations. One reason was Clinton’s fear that pushing the issue now would undermine his support for the reform policies of Russian president Boris Yeltsin, who warned Clinton privately that he could not countenance military action against the Serbs so long as the peace process was still ongoing.⁴⁰ Another reason was Clinton’s sense that lift and strike might not do the job and might in fact risk a new American quagmire. A key moment came after a White House photo-op with U.S. troops returning from Somalia. Clinton pulled Aspin and Powell aside to tell them about a book he had been reading by Robert D. Kaplan called *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*, which detailed the region’s history of violent ethnic conflict. Aspin was astonished. “Holy shit! He’s going south on lift and strike,” he thought. After returning to the Pentagon, Aspin called Lake and Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff to warn them. “Guys, he’s going south on this policy. His heart isn’t in it. . . . We have a serious problem here. We’re out there pushing a policy that the President’s not comfortable with.”⁴¹ Clinton’s apparent second thoughts may also have been influenced by a *Wall Street Journal* article on “How to Think about Bosnia,” by Arthur Schlesinger Jr., published on May 3. In it, Schlesinger warned the president that, like Lyndon Johnson and Vietnam, intervention in the Balkans could undermine his domestic policy.⁴²

Upon returning to Washington, Christopher immediately went to the White House to brief the president on his trip. He was blunt about what it would take to rescue the lift and strike policy, reporting that the allies “will only be persuaded by the raw power approach. . . . That is, we have to tell them that we have firmly decided to go ahead with our preferred

39. Quoted in Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 155.

40. Walker, *The President We Deserve*, p. 267. At the time, U.S.-Russia relations topped the administration’s foreign policy agenda and there was widespread agreement within the administration that any policy toward Bosnia would have to be supportive of, or at least not undermine, relations with Moscow.

41. Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 157.

42. See Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 158; Walker, *The President We Deserve*, p. 266.

option and that we expect them to support us."⁴³ No one, not even the most vociferous supporters of air strikes, spoke up in favor of the "raw power approach." Pressuring the Europeans to support lift and strike risked a major confrontation with the allies and would make the United States solely responsible for Bosnia. Said one official, "If we'd bet the ranch, said to the French and English, 'This threatens a fundamental breach in our relationships,' we could perhaps have got the Europeans—kicking and screaming—involved. But this would have made it an American problem. We would have taken over."⁴⁴ No one in the administration, least of all the president, was prepared to take full responsibility for the conflict given that the costs of doing so would involve spending political capital and other resources that Clinton needed to further the domestic policy agenda on which he was elected. Hence while Clinton would remark as late as May 14 that lift and strike was "still on the table,"⁴⁵ it was clear that this policy was effectively dead.

Once internal support for lift and strike had dissipated, containment of the Bosnian conflict rather than intervention to resolve it became the name of the game. As Christopher, who had worked especially hard to get Bosnia off the front pages of the newspapers, later recalled, "although lift and strike remained formally on the table, attention turned to how we could keep the conflict from spreading and deal with the humanitarian problems it had created."⁴⁶

In what would become a pattern in the administration's approach to Bosnia in these early years, the failure of a U.S. policy initiative was soon followed by Washington adopting the approach favored by the Europeans. In this case, the new policy consisted of defending six Muslim enclaves that the UN on May 6 had declared "safe areas." There was much wrangling among the allies over how to defend the enclaves. The Europeans called on the United States and Russia to provide troops to protect the areas, a call Washington firmly rebuffed—with Clinton emphasizing that he would not send U.S. troops into "a shooting gallery."⁴⁷

43. Christopher, *In the Stream of History*, pp. 346–47.

44. Cited in Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 156.

45. "Press Conference by the President" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 1993).

46. Christopher, *In the Stream of History*, p. 347.

47. "Remarks by the President in a Photo Opportunity with the Cabinet" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 21, 1993).

Agreement on a new policy direction was finally reached on May 22. Under an arrangement known as the Joint Action Plan, the United States, Russia, Spain, Britain, and France agreed to:⁴⁸

- Protect the six “safe areas” with force, if necessary (with the United States committed only to provide air support);
- Establish an international war crimes tribunal;
- Place monitors on the Serbian border to ensure Belgrade was honoring the international embargo of the Bosnian Serbs; and
- Increase the international presence in Kosovo and Macedonia to help contain the conflict.

There was no mention of lifting the arms embargo or of air strikes. The focus had shifted from intervention to containment.

Enter NATO: Air Strikes and “Safe Areas”

While the Joint Action Plan managed to paper over the differences between the United States and its allies, it did little to calm the situation in Bosnia. By early July 1993, reports of Serb shelling and the deteriorating humanitarian situation were again making headlines. The situation in and around Sarajevo was particularly bad, as Serb artillery shells rained down from the surrounding mountains preventing international relief supplies from getting through. Gruesome tales of people resorting to eating raw sewage and the rapid spreading of highly contagious diseases were appearing in newspapers. Graphic pictures of the horrible conditions in the city that had hosted the winter Olympics less than a decade before were beamed by CNN around the world.

Among those watching in growing shock and disbelief was President Clinton, who was attending the annual meeting of the Group of Seven (G-7) countries in Tokyo. Appalled by the reports and images, the president pressed his secretary of state and national security adviser to develop viable military options to avert an even worse disaster in the coming winter. Clinton explicitly told Lake that he wanted him to look at all options—including the use of American ground forces. Lake believed that the president was committed this time, and he asked Aspin to order up a full panoply of military options to address the situation in Sarajevo and

48. “Text of Joint Action Program Released by the Office of the Spokesman,” May 22, 1993, in U.S. Department of State, “Opening Statement at News Conference on Bosnia Office of the Spokesman” (May 22, 1993).

other enclaves under siege by Bosnian Serb forces. Sensing a new opening for a more assertive policy, officials in the State Department began to push a more muscular approach as well. Christopher, who had run hot and cold over Bosnia policy since becoming secretary of state, now ran hot, prodded in part by his staff and in part by Clinton's renewed engagement on the issue.⁴⁹

Upon their return from Asia, the principals met to hear a briefing from Joint Chiefs of Staff Vice Chairman Admiral David Jeremiah on the available military options. Jeremiah contended that it would take roughly 70,000 troops to relieve the pressure on Sarajevo. The large force requirement was due to the fact that the airport's closure meant that the troops would have to traverse hostile territory to get to the city before they could lift the siege. Although in subsequent discussions Powell indicated that only 25,000 troops might be needed for the more limited mission of helping to bring relief supplies into the city, few principals believed it likely that sufficient congressional and public support could be garnered to make even this a realistic option.⁵⁰

The alternative to deploying ground troops was, once again, the use of air power. Two distinct purposes for using air power had emerged in the initial deliberations. Officials in the State Department were arguing in favor of threatening air strikes to end the "strangulation" of Sarajevo and possibly of the other Muslim enclaves under attack by Bosnian Serb forces. In contrast, Lake and his NSC staff suggested that, in addition to assuaging the humanitarian situation, air power could be used to force the Serbs into serious peace negotiations. As Lake said later, "The idea was, if we're going to use power for the sake of diplomacy, let's relate it directly to the diplomacy."⁵¹ After several more rounds of feverish discussions, the principals agreed that a new push for air strikes made sense. Their aim would be to end the Bosnian Serb "strangulation" of Sarajevo and the other UN "safe areas" as well as to place "air power in the service of diplomacy" by

49. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997; Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 273–74; and Daniel Williams, "Grim Balkans Outlook Affected U.S. Position," *Washington Post*, August 19, 1993, pp. A1, A24.

50. Madeleine Albright was the only principal to argue strongly in favor of the ground troops proposal, believing that such action could be explained to the American people. At times, Christopher supported Albright, especially if it involved a decision to go it alone if necessary. See Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 274–75; and Mark Matthews, "U.S. Nears Sarajevo Rescue," *Baltimore Sun*, July 14, 1993, p. A14.

51. Quoted in Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 275.

forcing them to commence serious negotiations on the basis of an agreed cease-fire.⁵²

One key issue remaining was who would make the threat and, if necessary, implement it. Christopher, in particular, hesitated about having to get the allies on board. With his European trip of the previous May still fresh on his mind, the secretary of state was reluctant to get too far out in front of a policy, only again to be undermined by European opposition. Christopher's concerns were eased when it was agreed that, while allied agreement would be sought, the United States would proceed unilaterally if necessary, making clear the consequences for the alliance if the Europeans did not go along. In a play on the administration's policy toward gays in the military, one official described the new approach as, "Don't ask, tell."⁵³

On the weekend of July 24–25, 1993, Lake and Bartholomew secretly flew to Europe to talk with British and French officials. In making the administration's latest argument for air strikes, Lake did not adopt the consultative mode that Christopher had used three months earlier. Instead, Clinton's national security adviser made clear that "the President had decided" that a new policy was needed. That policy consisted of air strikes to end the siege of Sarajevo and other "safe areas" and to force the Bosnian Serbs to engage in serious negotiations. To underscore U.S. determination, Lake made clear that the future of the alliance was on the line. If nothing was done and Sarajevo collapsed, the NATO summit scheduled for January 1994 would be a farce and transatlantic relations would be severely damaged. Moreover, Lake stressed, acquiescing in the ethnic cleansing of the Bosnian Muslims would have broad implications for Western interests throughout the Muslim world.⁵⁴ The British liked the plan, but the French expressed reservations. It was agreed that further discussions were needed.

Discussions between top U.S., British, and French officials continued in Washington immediately upon Lake's return from Europe. By the end of the week, there appeared sufficient agreement among these key allies to try to get a formal NATO decision in Brussels. The North Atlantic Council (NAC) met on August 2 to discuss the threat and possible use of air strikes. After a marathon, sixteen-hour session that, according to one U.S.

52. Drew, *On the Edge*, pp. 275–76; and Williams, "Grim Balkans Outlook Affected U.S. Position," p. A24.

53. Michael Gordon, "Rebuffed Once, U.S. Takes a Forceful Tack toward Allies on Approach to Balkan War," *New York Times*, August 3, 1993, p. A1.

54. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997. See also Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 277.

official, was "as bitter and rancorous a discussion as has ever taken place in the alliance," the allies finally reached agreement.⁵⁵ The NAC communiqué stated:

—The Alliance has now decided to make immediate preparations for undertaking, in the event that the strangulation of Sarajevo and other areas continues, including wide-scale interference with humanitarian assistance, stronger measures including air strikes against those responsible, Bosnian Serbs and others, in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

—These measures will be under the authority of the United Nations Security Council and within the framework of relevant UN Security Council resolutions, and in support of UNPROFOR in the performance of its overall mandate. For that purpose, full coordination will be carried out with the United Nations, including appropriate arrangements between the NATO Military Authorities and UNPROFOR and consultation with UNHCR (the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

—The Council has accordingly asked the NATO Military Authorities urgently to draw up, in close coordination with UNPROFOR, operational options for air strikes, including the appropriate command and control and decision-making arrangements for their implementation.⁵⁶

The administration trumpeted the agreement as a major success, but that proved to be an overstatement. In the end, Washington gained NATO's support for threatening air strikes only at a heavy price: while the allies would support the use of NATO air power in case of the continued strangulation of Sarajevo, the decision on whether to conduct such strikes was to be shared by NATO and the UN, giving both organizations an effective veto.⁵⁷ Thus was born the infamous "dual-key" arrangement under which

55. Quoted in Barton Gellman and Trevor Rowe, "NATO Prepares Bosnia Target Lists," *Washington Post*, August 4, 1993, p. A1.

56. "Press Statement by the Secretary General," following the Special Meeting of the North Atlantic Council (Brussels: NATO Headquarters, August 2, 1993).

57. See Barton Gellman and Trevor Rowe, "U.S. Agrees to UN Veto on Bombing," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1993, p. A1; and Douglas Jehl, "U.S. Cedes to UN an Air Strike Veto," *New York Times*, August 7, 1993, p. A4. At the last minute during the August 2 meeting of the North Atlantic Council, the British (who until that time had been fully supportive of the U.S. position) argued that in view of the large UN pres-

the UN secretary general (or his designated representative) would have to approve the initiation and scope of any NATO air action. Given dominant British and French roles in the UNPROFOR command, the dual-key provided London and Paris with a way to manipulate the air strikes threat to their own purposes. While often agreeing with the United States and others in NATO that air strikes were desirable and necessary, London and Paris were able to use their dominant roles in the UN to veto or restrict the scope of NATO action. In the end, the acceptance of a UN role, which was necessitated by the need to reach a NATO consensus, would prove to be a major stumbling block in future attempts to use air power in punitive strikes.

The Sarajevo Ultimatum

In what would become a well-known pattern, the Bosnian Serbs responded to NATO’s latest threat by easing up their military assault on Sarajevo and other “safe areas.” Prospects for a negotiated compromise throughout the fall brightened, further undermining allied support for air strikes. However, once the wind had been taken out of NATO’s sails, prospects for peace waned. By the end of 1993, the Bosnian Serbs had again dramatically increased their pressure on the Muslim “safe areas,” attacking UN humanitarian relief efforts and resuming the heavy artillery shelling of Sarajevo.

As before, the NATO allies were deeply divided as to how to respond to the latest Bosnian Serb assault. A compromise statement was issued at the NATO summit on January 11, 1994, but its strong rhetoric could not hide the continuing and fundamental disagreement among the allies on what needed to be done.⁵⁸ These disagreements boiled over two weeks later when, at a Paris meeting with Secretary Christopher, French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé strongly urged the United States to take a more aggressive role in Bosnia. Juppé argued that if Washington refused to put troops on the ground, then it should at least be prepared to push the Bosnian

ence on the ground, the United Nations should have a role in the decision on launching air strikes. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997.

58. “Declaration of the Heads of State and Government,” Press Communiqué M-1(94)3, Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, North Atlantic Cooperation Council (Brussels: NATO headquarters, January 11, 1994).

Muslims into accepting a deal that was less than Sarajevo was hoping to attain.⁵⁹ In so doing, Paris exposed the fundamental contradiction of the U.S. position on Bosnia. While the Clinton administration supported the Bosnian Muslim contention that nothing less than the status quo ante—including the reversal of the Serb war gains—was an acceptable outcome of negotiations, it was unwilling to run the military risks necessary to bring this about. Washington would neither put its troops on the ground to support the Muslim cause nor push Sarajevo into accepting an outcome considerably less favorable than the one it sought. As Clinton stated publicly after the Paris meeting had concluded, "I don't think that the international community has the capacity to stop people within the nation from their civil war until they decide to do it."⁶⁰

As pressure on the United States to do more increased, those within the Clinton administration who had long supported a U.S. leadership role began to mobilize. Upon returning from a post-NATO summit trip to central and eastern Europe, Madeleine Albright was convinced that the Bosnia imbroglio had begun to hurt the development of democracy in the region. In a passionate report, she warned the president of the dire consequences to the administration's Europe policy and the credibility and effectiveness of NATO and the United Nations. Tony Lake had separately come to the same conclusions and began an internal NSC review to determine what could be done. At a meeting with the president and his principal foreign policy advisers in late January 1994, a consensus emerged that a more aggressive U.S. approach to the negotiations was necessary, including putting air power in the service of diplomacy.⁶¹ Christopher was asked to put the set of ideas into a coherent strategy. A paper reflecting input from Lake, Albright, and the new secretary of defense, William Perry, was sent to the president on February 4. It called for a U.S. leadership role in trying to find a diplomatic solution by both threatening the Serbs with air strikes if Pale refused to negotiate seriously and strengthening the Bosnian negotiating position by forging an alliance between the Muslims and Croats. In a private cover letter to the president, Christopher pleaded for a new approach: "I am acutely uncomfortable with the passive position we are now in, and believe that now is the time to undertake a new

59. Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Rejects Plea to Act in Bosnia," *New York Times*, January 25, 1994, pp. A1, A8.

60. "Remarks by the President in Press Availability" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, January 24, 1994).

61. Interview with a senior administration official, October 21, 1997.

initiative. . . . It is increasingly clear there will likely be no solution to the conflict if the United States does not take the lead in a new diplomatic effort."⁶²

Then, just as the policy process was getting into gear, the situation on the ground provided an unexpected boost for a proactive U.S. policy, albeit in a most unwelcome fashion. On February 5, an artillery shell landed in a crowded Sarajevo marketplace, killing 68 and wounding about 200 others. In a meeting that afternoon with his foreign policy advisers, President Clinton expressed outrage and sought ideas on how to respond. While all agreed that air strikes were in order if there were evidence that the shell came from Serb artillery, the lack of definitive proof made some officials reluctant to recommend immediate retaliation. Unsure how to proceed and concerned that the United States not move too far ahead of the allies, Clinton tasked Albright to work through the UN to determine responsibility for the attack and ordered the U.S. military to help evacuate the wounded from Sarajevo. Meanwhile, Secretary Christopher would consult with the allies to determine an appropriate course of action.⁶³

One of the ideas to come out of Christopher's discussions with the allies was a French proposal to use air power to establish and enforce a demilitarized zone around Sarajevo. While the U.S. officials liked the concept and were encouraged by France's newfound willingness to threaten air strikes, the Pentagon in particular believed that the quarantine requirements were too ambitious. The French plan would impose a heavy weapons exclusion zone extending thirty kilometers from the center of Sarajevo and require many thousands of additional ground troops to enforce compliance. As a result, during two painstaking meetings, the principals reworked the French ideas in a way that would permit enforcement of the protected zone without the deployment of additional ground forces. The modified plan reduced the weapons exclusion zone to a twenty-kilometer radius and required the parties (including the Bosnian Muslims) to withdraw or place under UN control all heavy weapons within ten days, or face air strikes. In the interim, any further attacks on civilians within the demilitarized zone would be met with immediate air strikes.

After extensive intra-alliance discussions, the North Atlantic Council endorsed the U.S. concept and issued the Sarajevo ultimatum on February 9,

62. Elaine Sciolino and Douglas Jehl, "As U.S. Sought a Bosnia Policy, the French Offered a Good Idea," *New York Times*, February 14, 1994, pp. A1, A6; here p. A6.

63. Sciolino and Jehl, "As U.S. Sought a Bosnia Policy."

which was to go into effect at midnight the following day.⁶⁴ Over the next ten days, a flurry of diplomatic activity sought to assure that the parties would abide by the directive's requirements and prevent NATO from having to engage in combat operations for the first time in its forty-five year history. On February 10, a UN negotiated cease-fire went into effect. A week later, Russian negotiators secured the Bosnian Serbs' agreement to abide by the NATO deadline and the Serbs began turning over their weapons within the zone to the UN.⁶⁵ When the ultimatum deadline expired on February 21, NATO determined that the requirements set on February 9 had been met. The siege of Sarajevo had been lifted.

The Washington Agreement

In addition to NATO's newfound willingness to implement air strikes, another significant outcome of the discussions leading up to the issuance of the Sarajevo ultimatum was the U.S. decision to become actively involved in the diplomatic negotiations. Concurrent with the Sarajevo ultimatum, the president had dispatched Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff and Charles Redman, who had replaced Reginald Bartholomew as special envoy to the Balkans, to London, Paris, and Bonn to consult with the allies and underscore the new U.S. determination to find a political solution. Previously, the United States had distanced itself from European negotiation efforts on the basis that the territorial divisions envisaged in the European proposals short-changed the Muslims and legitimized "ethnic cleansing." However, under the new U.S. diplomatic initiative, the administration proved more willing to engage the Bosnian government in discussions on what sorts of arrangements the Muslims could reasonably expect to get out of any negotiation. As one State Department official described the effort, "We will be talking to the Muslims about their bottom line. . . . If they want an intact Bosnia, well, we'll just have to see."⁶⁶

64. "Decisions Taken at the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council," Press Release (94)15 (Brussels: NATO headquarters, February 9, 1994).

65. For details on these deliberations, see Dick Leurdijk, *The United Nations and NATO in the Former Yugoslavia, 1991-1996: Limits to Diplomacy and Force* (The Hague: Netherlands Atlantic Commission, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, 1996), pp. 41-47.

66. Ann Devroy and Daniel Williams, "Clinton Seeks NATO Deadline for Removal of Serb Artillery," *Washington Post*, February 9, 1994, p. A16.

Redman believed that a key to the success of any new diplomatic effort was to end the Muslim-Croat conflict. This conflict, which developed in the spring of 1993 when the parties began battling over Croat-controlled lands in central Bosnia, complicated the peace negotiations in two important ways. First, having three rather than two parties involved in the negotiations made it inherently more difficult to reach a settlement. Second, the Muslim-Croat conflict had left the Serbs with a decisive military advantage and little incentive to concede territory during negotiations. U.S. officials saw a possible Muslim-Croat alliance as a means to improve the military balance of power on the ground and thereby achieve a better (and more acceptable) settlement for the Bosnian Muslims.

Intensive negotiations took place between the Muslims and Croats in February and March 1994, with Redman playing a key mediating role. The basic framework that emerged called for the creation of a joint Muslim-Croat federation that would consist of about half of Bosnia’s territory and be linked in an economic confederation with Croatia. The Bosnian Serbs would constitute their own entity alongside the Muslim-Croat federation within a united Bosnia. A final deal was struck on March 18 after four days of intense discussions in Washington. Although many details remained unresolved (including the drafting of a constitution and the specifics of military integration), the basic elements of a new power-sharing arrangement were agreed by the Bosnian Muslim and Croat sides. On that same day, President Clinton congratulated the sides on having established their federation in what came to be known as the Washington Agreement—the administration’s first successful Bosnian initiative.⁶⁷

The Contact Group

With the Washington Agreement, the Clinton administration succeeded in isolating the Serbs at the negotiating table. But this was just a first step, for peace between the Bosnian Croats and Muslims would mean little if the Bosnian Serbs could not also be brought on board. After all, although the Muslim-Croat federation was to consist of roughly 50 percent of

67. “Remarks by President Clinton, President Izetbegovic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, President Tudjman of Croatia in Signing of Peace Agreement” (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 18, 1994). See also Burg and Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, pp. 292–98; and Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: TV Books, distributed by Penguin USA, 1996), pp. 319–23.

Bosnian territory, at present the two combined controlled only 30 percent. How to get the Bosnian Serbs to the table and then agree to give up large parts of their ill-gotten gains was a major preoccupation of negotiations throughout the remainder of 1994.

Assistance in this effort came from an unexpected corner. Starting in early 1994, Russia became a major player in Balkan diplomacy. In mid-February, Russian envoy Vitaly Churkin had helped convince the Bosnian Serbs to withdraw their guns from Sarajevo and two weeks later he persuaded them to reopen the airfield in Tuzla for humanitarian relief flights.⁶⁸ Moreover, when the Bosnian Serbs turned up the pressure on the "safe area" of Gorazde in early April, Russia joined with NATO in compelling the Serbs to back off the assault.

The emergence of Washington and Moscow as major players on the Bosnian peace-negotiating scene suggested that the EU-UN arrangements that had been in place since late 1991 were no longer up to the task. To ensure their inclusion, a new negotiating forum known as the Contact Group was formed in April 1994. It consisted of representatives of the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and Germany. The Contact Group offered each of the five members particular advantages. For the Europeans, the arrangement proved to be a way to ensure that the United States would not move too far ahead of the prevailing consensus. For Washington, the Contact Group provided the ability to avoid complex processes that would involve all twelve EU members and the unwieldy—and, in Washington's eyes, no longer trustworthy—UN system. For Moscow, finally, the group offered a way to confirm Russia's continuing international standing as a major power.

Throughout the spring and early summer of 1994, Contact Group discussions focused on a map of the territorial division among the parties in a peace settlement. Drawing largely on the efforts of David Owen and Thorvald Stoltenberg (who had replaced Cyrus Vance as the UN representative), the map eventually used by the Contact Group envisioned a territorial division that provided the Muslim-Croat federation 51 percent of the territory, and the Bosnian Serbs the remaining 49 percent. By providing the Muslim-Croat federation a majority of the territory, yet allowing the Serbs to maintain their occupation of significant swaths of previously Muslim lands, U.S. officials viewed the proposal as a compromise between justice and reality. The details of the peace agreement, such as the

68. Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. and Russians Broker New Pacts for a Bosnia Peace," *New York Times*, March 2, 1994, p. A1.

Figure 1. *The Contact Group Plan*



constitutional arrangements, would be worked out later in direct talks between the parties. As Redman described the plan, "It's a reasonable solution, but it's one that will not please everyone."⁶⁹ In particular, the

69. William Drozdiak, "Big Powers Give Final Endorsement to Partition Plan for Bosnia," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1994, p. A21.

map accepted the de facto division of Bosnia, long the aim of the Serbs and a premise of European effort, but antithetical to the idea of a multiethnic and territorially intact Bosnia. Its acceptance thus represented a major U.S. change of heart.

On July 6, 1994, the Contact Group formally presented its plan to the parties on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, giving them two weeks to accept the proposal. If either party refused to accept the plan, the Contact Group warned of punitive actions. The Muslims and Croats agreed to the plan almost immediately. Characteristically, the Bosnian Serbs delayed their response to the very last minute and then couched the terms of their acceptance in so many conditions as to be tantamount to a rejection.⁷⁰ After the deadline expired on July 20, the Contact Group urged the Serbs to reconsider for a second and third time, but to no avail.

As a result of the Bosnian Serb rejection, the Contact Group was forced to consider punitive measures that it hoped would compel the Serbs to accept the agreement. Throughout the Contact Group discussions, Washington—partly due to congressional pressure and partly in order to gain leverage over the Serbs—had pushed for lifting the arms embargo if Pale refused to accept the plan. However, the allies were quick to remind Washington that such action meant the UN forces would have to be withdrawn, a consequence no one was prepared to accept.⁷¹ Another measure that had more support was the tightening of sanctions on Serbia. Given his longstanding political and material support to the war effort, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic had long been seen as central to getting the Bosnian Serbs to sign a peace agreement. In a memorandum to the EU foreign ministers, David Owen wrote:

The key as always is Milosevic. He understands power and he will only pressurize the Bosnian Serbs further if the Contact Group convince him that they are serious. He must receive a sharp reminder . . . that we expect him to act against the Bosnian Serbs, and that if he does not deliver, we will take further action against him.⁷²

70. See David Ottaway, "Bosnian Serb Reply to Peace Plan Seeks More Talks on Map, Six Issues," *Washington Post*, July 22, 1994, p. A20.

71. See Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, p. 290.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

When Milosevic's entreaties in Pale failed to convince the Bosnian Serbs, the Serb president agreed to sever ties with Pale in return for relief from international sanctions.⁷³ Although economic assistance to the Bosnian Serbs was largely cut off, military assistance continued to flow across the Drina River.

Bihac

Throughout the summer and into the fall of 1994, the Contact Group continued its efforts to get the Bosnian Serbs to sign on to its proposal. By October, however, the situation on the ground had changed dramatically, further undermining the prospects for a negotiated solution. The Bosnian Muslims had launched an ill-advised offensive from the Bihac "safe area," and the Serbs responded with a major counterattack. By November, some 2,000 to 4,000 Croatian Serb troops had joined 10,000 Bosnian Serbs in the assault. The new fighting risked a major escalation of the war, not least by possibly dragging Croatia directly into the Bosnian conflict. Whereas the United States worried about an escalation of the conflict to a region-wide war, the allies were less concerned. British and French officials blamed the Bosnian government for starting the fighting and they viewed the Serb counterattack as little more than an attempt to reacquire lost territory.

Aside from disagreeing about the risks posed by the escalating fighting around Bihac, the United States and its major European allies also differed more generally over how to proceed in the search for an end to the Bosnian conflict. One major source of conflict was the question of the arms embargo, which the Clinton administration announced it would no longer enforce. The president had agreed to this action in negotiations with Congress in order to prevent passage of a law that would have unilaterally lifted the embargo against the Bosnian Muslims. Days before the president's announcement on November 10, 1994, that the United States would no longer enforce the embargo, Clinton had suffered a stunning electoral defeat when the Republicans captured both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years. The new Republican leadership—with the Senate's

73. John Pomfret, "Yugoslavia Orders End of Ties to Bosnian Serbs," *Washington Post*, August 5, 1994, p. A23; and Barbara Crossette, "UN Eases Curbs on Yugoslavia after Serbian Peace Concessions," *New York Times*, September 24, 1994, p. 1.

new majority leader Robert Dole (R-Kans.) at the forefront—had long favored lifting the embargo, unilaterally if necessary. Clinton was therefore in no position to ignore congressional sentiment on the embargo question.⁷⁴

The allies, of course, did not see it this way. To them, the possible inflow of new arms to any party represented additional risk to their forces. It was therefore particularly infuriating for the United States, which did not share this risk, to end enforcement of the arms embargo. The French reaction to the U.S. announcement was particularly angry. A foreign ministry spokesman said, "This action by the Americans could ruin chances of maintaining a common approach and lead to a lot of nasty finger-pointing across the Atlantic. . . . If fighting spreads and the European troops are forced to pull out, the Americans will have to shoulder the responsibility for what comes next."⁷⁵

A second, related source of disagreement concerned the question of air strikes in response to the Bosnian Serb assault on the UN safe area of Bihac. At NATO's urging and with the UN's reluctant assent, NATO launched limited air strikes against an airfield in Croatia from which Croatian Serb aircraft were flying missions against Bihac, as well as against a number of Serb surface-to-air missile sites in Bosnia. Subsequent NATO and UN threats of further escalation did not deter the Bosnian Serb forces. To the contrary, the Serbs responded with a series of countermeasures, including blockading 200 UN peacekeepers stationed at nine weapons collection sites around Sarajevo, detaining 50 Canadian troops, and stopping the movement of all other UN military observers throughout Bosnia. The Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, underscored these actions with a blunt warning to the UN: "If a NATO attack happens, it will mean that further relations between yourselves and our side will be rendered impossible because we would have to treat you as our enemies. All United Nations Protection Force personnel as well as NATO personnel would be treated as our enemies."⁷⁶

While the United States insisted that NATO proceed with further air

74. See Michael R. Gordon, "President Orders End to Enforcing Bosnian Embargo," *New York Times*, November 11, 1994, p. A1; and Craig R. Whitney, "Move on Bosnia by U.S. Alarms Allies in NATO," *New York Times*, November 12, 1994, p. A1.

75. Bradley Graham and William Drozdiak, "Bosnia Hails Arms Ban Shift by U.S.: Europeans' Warn Step May Strain Alliance," *Washington Post*, November 12, 1994, p. A21.

76. Roger Cohen, "Fighting Rages as NATO Debates How to Protect Bosnian Enclave," *New York Times*, November 25, 1994, p. A16.

strikes to try to save Bihac, those allies with troops on the ground and vulnerable to Serb retaliation were in no mood to accept additional risks. Discussions in Brussels and allied capitals made clear that the Europeans had reached the end of the road: either the United States would deploy the additional troops to Bosnia necessary for the UN to do its job effectively, or the UN forces would limit their activities to protecting humanitarian agencies and supplies. As British Defense Minister Malcolm Rifkind commented, "Those who call for action by the world must match words [by] deeds, and that doesn't require just a few aircraft."⁷⁷

By Thanksgiving 1994, the differences within NATO over Bosnia policy that had simmered for months below the surface had come to a full boil, creating the worst crisis within the Atlantic alliance since 1956. It was clear that the Clinton administration had to make a real choice: either Washington would go ahead with air strikes (unilaterally, if necessary) in support of the Bosnian Muslims and defense of the UN "safe area" in Bihac or it would have to abandon the prospect of further air strikes to avoid precipitating the withdrawal of European and other UN forces from Bosnia. Initially air strikes might save Bihac from a Serb onslaught, but it threatened to undermine not only the most successful military alliance in history, but also one that provided the essential glue for the U.S. military presence in Europe and its leadership of NATO. Forgoing air strikes might save the alliance, but at the possible cost of a Bosnian Serb victory in Bihac that would not only leave many thousands of innocents at the mercy of marauding Serb forces, but also call into question the very safe-area concept around which support for the use of NATO air power had originally coalesced.

Faced with the possibility that NATO might be torn asunder by the rift over Bosnia policy, the administration decided to put NATO unity first and abandon any effort to convince the allies or the United Nations that air strikes remained necessary to turn the military tide in Bosnia.⁷⁸ Lake argued in a memorandum to the president, "to use NATO air strikes to prevent the fall of Bihac has only intensified the trans-Atlantic friction. . . . Bihac's fall has exposed the inherent contradictions in trying to use NATO

77. Robin Knight, "On the Road to Exhaustion," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 5, 1994, p. 64.

78. For a more in-depth review of U.S. policymaking on Bosnia during this period, see Ivo H. Daalder, *Anthony Lake and the War in Bosnia*, Pew Case Studies in International Affairs, no. 467-95-N (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1995).

air power coercively against the Bosnian Serbs when our allies have troops on the ground attempting to maintain impartiality in performing a humanitarian mission." Lake concluded that since "the stick of military pressure is no longer viable," it should be abandoned.⁷⁹

Instead of air strikes, the administration decided that henceforth the objective of U.S. policy toward Bosnia would be, first, to mend the rift in the alliance; second, to contain the war in Bosnia and prevent its spread throughout the Balkans; and, only third, to help preserve the territorial integrity of Bosnia through negotiation.⁸⁰ As one senior official explained, the "principals agreed that NATO is more important than Bosnia. . . . Our objective, we pretty much accept at this point, is containment. Bosnia is a tragedy. A greater Balkan war would be a disaster."⁸¹ Said another, "We are not downplaying Bosnia. . . . The problem is that we have no maneuver room. This time we have no leverage with the Europeans unless we agree to put peacekeeping troops on the ground."⁸²

The administration realized that abandoning the threat of military pressure on the Serbs would complicate the search for a diplomatic solution. To enhance prospects for success, the principals agreed that a cease-fire of three to six months would be necessary. That meant pressuring Sarajevo to halt its mostly unsuccessful attempts to regain lost territory and making concessions to get the Serbs to the bargaining table. After all, Pale had refused to accept the Contact Group plan even as the basis for negotiation, and it was bound to continue to reject it now that the prospect for effective military pressure had disappeared. The concessions agreed to by the principals were threefold:

—First, territorial modifications to the Contact Group map dividing Bosnia 51-49 percent between the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Bosnian Serb entity would be acceptable so long as the parties agreed;

79. Cited in Michael Gordon, Douglas Jehl, and Elaine Sciolino, "Conflict in the Balkans: The Policy; Colliding Missions—A Special Report: U.S. and Bosnia: How a Policy Changed," *New York Times*, December 4, 1994, pp. A1, A20.

80. Michael Gordon, "U.S., in Shift, Gives Up Its Talk of Tough Action against Serbs," *New York Times*, November 29, 1994, p. A16; and Norman Kempster and Jim Mann, "U.S. Says Talks Remain Best Option in Bosnia," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1994, p. A1.

81. Michael Kelly, "Surrender and Blame," *The New Yorker*, December 19, 1994, p. 51.

82. Gordon, "U.S., in Shift, Gives Up Its Talk of Tough Action against Serbs," p. A16.

—Second, constitutional links between the Bosnian Serbs and Serbia proper would be possible—so long as these were balanced by similar links between the Federation and Croatia;

—Third, contacts with the Bosnian Serb leadership in Pale would resume, thus providing it with a degree of legitimacy that the leadership had long desired.

Charles Redman was sent to Pale in early December to present this list of concessions directly to the Bosnian Serb leadership.⁸³

Notwithstanding these significant concessions, the Bosnian Serbs showed little interest in negotiations. Rather than agreeing to engage directly with the United States or other Contact Group countries, Pale sought to bypass the normal diplomatic channels and engage former President Jimmy Carter, who in previous months had played the peacemaker in North Korea and Haiti.⁸⁴ Although skeptical that Carter could succeed, the Clinton administration did not oppose the former president’s trip to Pale to determine whether negotiations were possible. Carter succeeded in gaining both sides’ agreement to halt military activities until April 30, 1995, but his trip did little to move negotiations closer to a breakthrough.⁸⁵

Containing “the Problem from Hell”

By the end of 1994, the Clinton administration’s policy toward Bosnia had reached a virtual dead end. The many months of debate within the Atlantic alliance had shown that further U.S. pressure on the allies to allow the use of air power would likely call the continued utility of NATO into question. Bihac proved to be the last straw. As one senior official said at the time:

We have been putting straws on the back of NATO solidarity over Bosnia for the last two years. We have been pushing them over and over to use military force, to the point where we have come to threaten

83. Roger Cohen, “Maps, Guns, and Bosnia: Redrawn Map Is Unlikely to Please,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1994, p. A1. See also Gordon, “U.S., in Shift, Gives Up Its Talk of Tough Action against Serbs,” pp. A1, A16.

84. See James Wooten, “The Conciliator,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 29, 1995, p. 28.

85. For a review of the Carter mission, see Douglas Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter’s Journey beyond the White House* (Viking Books, 1998), pp. 443–53.

the destruction of the transatlantic treaty. We decided that we are not going to do that anymore. We are not going to make this a manhood test. We are not going to break NATO over this.⁸⁶

Once the administration decided that NATO was more important than Bosnia and that effective military pressure would no longer be available to influence the course of events there, it was logical to adopt a more flexible negotiating stance—including one that would be seen by many as rewarding the aggressor. That led to the decision to engage in direct contact with Pale and to relax the previous, non-negotiable strictures of the Contact Group plan. When that proved insufficient to bring the Bosnian Serbs back to the table, few minded handing off the task to others, including to former President Carter. By that time, most of the administration's foreign policy players had come to believe that Bosnia, in Secretary Christopher's memorable words, was "the problem from hell"⁸⁷ and therefore better avoided. The new goal became containment of the problem in the hope that this would provide time to turn foreign policy attention elsewhere. The only real question was whether the actors in Bosnia would allow U.S. attention to be diverted for long.

86. Quoted by Kelly, "Surrender and Blame," p. 51.

87. "Statement of Warren Christopher, Secretary of State," *Foreign Assistance Legislation for Fiscal Year 1994 (Parts 1 and 8)*, Hearings and markup before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 103 Cong. 1 sess. (Government Printing Office, 1993), p. 94.