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ON THE FRONT LINE
FOR INDEPENDENCE:
CROATIA AND
WASHINGTON

In October 1990, I published an article in an American newspaper entitled “Balkanization as a Blessing”. My purpose was to be somewhat of a devil’s advocate calling for the termination of Tito’s Yugoslavia and to highlight the dangerous political aspirations of Slobodan Milošević. I had several additional reasons for this position. First, to break free of conventional wisdom that Yugoslavia had to be preserved at all costs regardless of the aspirations of its constituent nations. Second, to look beyond what seemed to be inevitable disintegration and to try and contribute to the emergence of democratic independent states. And third, to challenge the Yugo-centrics in Washington who seemed to dominate the political debate but whose focus was narrow and Belgrade-focused.

Let me give you a little personal background to my own involvement in the demise of Yugoslavia. In my professional career until 1990 Yugoslavia was not on my agenda as I covered developments in the Soviet bloc first for Radio Free Europe and then for the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. Yugoslavia became one of my primary interests when the International Republican Institute asked me to help monitor the first multi-party elections in several Yugoslav republics including Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Kosovo. I must say that I have not really looked back since, and the former Yugoslav space became my primary focus in Washington, both for analysis and for policy recommendations.

During my election trips and political assessments in various republics, I sensed fairly quickly that Yugoslavia would soon become extinct. Only two real questions remained: how violent the process would be and how the United States and its European allies would react and what concrete initiatives they would undertake. Indeed, Croatia and the other republics aspiring to statehood faced a struggle on two fronts – one at home and the

other abroad. So let me briefly describe my own experiences on two of these fronts at that time – in Washington and in Croatia.

The Washington Front

I remember in the summer of 1990 preparing a report for the U.S. Department of Defense on the prospects for violent conflicts in post-communist Eastern Europe. In it I described the various points of contention across the region and zeroed in on Yugoslavia as the most obvious flashpoint for violent conflicts. But it was difficult to convince officials and policy experts in the administration that a bloody war was looming, and that it would not be a conventional war but one that could involve substantial civilian casualties. The conflict would be characterized by a land grab operation by rival nationalities and involving the largest and best-equipped military in the Balkans.

It also became an uphill struggle in DC both before and during the anti-civilian war to convince policy makers and legislators that the breakup of Yugoslavia was not actually the core of the problem, but the forcible attempts to hold the federation together and to recentralize power in Belgrade that promoted and legitimized violence. For many reasons, the George Bush senior administration favored keeping Yugoslavia together. However, I do not believe that this was a deliberately planned anti-Croatian or anti-Slovenian conspiracy as some have claimed. It was rather a question of stale conventional wisdom and misguided geopolitics.

Remember at that time, the Soviet Union was still in existence and there were fears in Washington that the violent breakup of Yugoslavia could presage the violent disintegration of the USSR by encouraging Ukraine and the Balts to push for outright independence and sparking conflicts with Moscow. There was also no experience of recognizing new states and visible concerns that other countries in the region could unravel as well if a precedent was set in Yugoslavia. In addition, the Bush White House was preoccupied with the Gulf War and its aftermath and simply did not pay sufficient attention to the dangers in Yugoslavia.

The official Washington mind-set at that time was extremely difficult to overcome and it was clearly stuck in the Cold War. This was despite all the evidence that a new age was dawning and regardless of repeated warnings by some observers that without early and intensive American involvement the chances of war were escalating. Belgrade

for its part saw American non-interference as tacit approval of Milošević's policies and as a free hand to stage a crackdown and ensure the forcible integrity of the Yugoslav state.

Of course, Belgrade skillfully exploited all these prejudices, fears, and distractions, and deliberately engineered a bloody war to prove that any collapse of Yugoslavia had to be violent and that the aspiring states were responsible for the ensuing conflict. There was one other element involved: the fact that several American officials had served in Yugoslavia at some point during their careers and still viewed the country as some sort of barrier against Soviet penetration and a semi-ally of the United States, even if a communist one.

There were only a handful of analysts at the time in Washington who supported the demise of Yugoslavia and backed independence for all the republics and provinces. I must admit that for me warnings by politicians and analysts that the collapse of Yugoslavia would set a precedent for the disintegration of the Soviet Union made the prospect of Croatian and Slovenian independence even more appealing.

In Washington at that time, from mid-1990 onwards, there was also an intensive campaign of anti-Croatian and anti-independence propaganda in the mass media. Commentators and journalists who had never heard of the country suddenly discovered some new fascist monster that was determined to destroy the apparently successful multi-ethnic Yugoslavia. Some of the propaganda was primitive, some more sophisticated, but one had a sense that there was significant choreography in the background, not so much by Belgrade but by pro-Belgrade sympathizers in the West, including academics and policy experts writing in leading newspapers and journals and with some access to legislators and administration officials.

I was fortunate in one important respect, in that I was not a traditional "Yugoslavist", unlike some of my academic or NGO colleagues. Many of them were so wrapped up in the mystique and the experience of Yugoslavia that they saw no viable alternative and viewed any moves toward independence as morally repugnant and politically destructive. It was difficult to try and counter the anti-Croatian propaganda in the press and among some policy circles. One had to patiently explain that there was life outside of Belgrade and that Yugoslavs and Serbs were actually a minority in this artificial state. One had to point out that Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina,

Kosovo, and Macedonia also had aspirations to independence and statehood, while the regime in Belgrade was seeking not only to stifle these movements but to create an even more centralized state than existed under communism in which a Serbian elite would evidently dominate.

The task of trying to keep events in some perspective and to write impartially and truthfully about Croatia was not made any easier by some of the policies of the Tudman government, especially when the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina erupted in the spring of 1992. Evidence of secret collaboration between Zagreb and Belgrade, of engagement in “ethnic cleansing” campaigns, atrocities, mass expulsions, and concentration camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina played into Belgrade’s hands so that Croatian nationalists were depicted as equally brutal to their Serbian counterparts. Even when Croatian independence was finally accepted in Washington, the negative publicity generated from Belgrade and through the media damaged the Croatian cause and set back the country’s progress toward international integration. The government in Zagreb contributed to this negativism and isolationism by its authoritarianism and self-destructive propaganda and it took years for the damage to be undone. The effort continues.

The Croatian Front

Turning to the homeland front, I was in Croatia at the height of the 1991 war and visited several front line positions to see for myself the effect and nature of the conflict. It was truly a war of state-orchestrated terrorism with overwhelming force against poorly armed defenders in areas that Serbian nationalists and the Yugoslav army sought to carve out for the Serbian Republic of Krajina. Let me just recollect a few strong impressions that the war left me with, not so much in terms of my political analysis but of my personal feelings and perceptions.

First, I was enormously impressed by the brave young Croats, both men and women, who came from the United States, Australia, Canada, and elsewhere to help their mother country at a time of dire need. It reminded me in many ways of Poland in 1980-1981 during the birth of Solidarity and after the imposition of martial law. These young Croats risked their lives not only as army volunteers but as couriers and guides for foreign journalists and visitors like myself to dangerous front line positions and besieged towns and villages across Croatia. I believe their courage and sacrifice should be specially recognized and

honored by the Croatian government. They certainly helped to reveal a more accurate picture of the war in Croatia.

Second, although I was unable to make it inside Vukovar itself at the height of the war, I was in several surrounding villages in Eastern Slavonija, between Osijek and Vukovar, as well as in the Karlovac and Sisak areas, and saw and heard the brutality of the attacks on civilians. It struck me then, however, that although outgunned and outmaneuvered by overwhelming military force, the Croatian drive for independence would eventually prevail. I could see in the faces of the defenders that they were determined to regain what they were so brutally losing in a war for which they were simply not prepared. Indeed, I would argue that the brutality of the murders, mutilations, and expulsions had an opposite effect to the one intended as it served to stiffen popular resistance and will power.

Third, I remember telling policy makers and legislators in Washington upon my return from Croatia that the destruction of Vukovar and the shelling of Dubrovnik was definite cause for a strong Western military response against the Yugoslav army. If Belgrade could escape any serious repercussions for these offensive outrages, then Milošević and his generals and paramilitaries would become more brazen and the war would almost certainly spread to other republics and become even more destructive. Unfortunately, events essentially proved this thesis to be correct. America's response was weak and ineffective and the idea that the Western Europeans could stand up to Milošević proved to be a costly illusion. This painful lesson initially fell on the heads of ordinary Croatian and Serbian civilians caught in the midst of the conflict.

And fourth, I believe that Vukovar has important lessons for all of us, especially now as America struggles with its own terrible civilian tragedies following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. The main lesson is that one simply cannot appease terror and anti-civilian wars through diplomacy, negotiations, or ineffectual sanctions. Weak responses and international indecision merely assists the aggressors and the terrorists. Early intervention is necessary to deter acts of brutality and outright murder, and to demonstrate that assaults on unarmed civilians are unacceptable and severely punishable. This must be particularly evident if we are serious about creating a Europe-wide security system. The first and fundamental principle of security is the security and safety of the individual.

The people of Vukovar displayed an amazing spirit of defiance and steadfastness despite their unpreparedness for

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the war. They bravely resisted the overwhelming military odds until their last bullet. It reminded me in some ways of the Warsaw uprising against the Nazi occupation in 1944, and other acts of unbelievable collective courage. The spirit of Vukovar can uplift other cities and other populations coping with trauma and disaster. Americans, who are so used to predictability, progress, and security, can themselves learn from Vukovar on how to cope with tragedy and loss and how to move ahead. I salute the brave people of Vukovar and may your city rise again as a jewel on the Danube.