



THE ROAD TO THE DAYTON ACCORDS

**A STUDY
OF AMERICAN
STATECRAFT**

DEREK CHOLLET

FOREWORD BY RICHARD HOLBROOKE



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Derek Chollet

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-6500-4

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First published in 2005 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978-1-349-52860-8

ISBN 978-1-4039-7889-9 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781403978899

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chollet, Derek H.

The road to Dayton : a study in statecraft / by Derek Chollet.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. United States—Foreign relations—Bosnia and Hercegovina. 2. Bosnia and Hercegovina—Foreign relations—United States. 3. Dayton Peace Accords (1995). 4. Yugoslav War, 1991–1995—Bosnia and Hercegovina. 5. Yugoslav War, 1991–1995—Peace. 6. Yugoslav War, 1991–1995—Diplomatic history. 7. United States—Foreign relations—1993–2001. 8. Diplomacy—Case studies. I. Title.

E183.8.B67C58 2005

949.703—dc22

2005047209

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: November 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In memory of Andrew Carpendale

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FOREWORD

By

Richard Holbrooke

There were over 30 ceasefires and agreements in Bosnia prior to the Dayton Peace Accords. All of them collapsed. Yet what was agreed upon at Dayton not only survived, it established the basis for a country that, with all its problems, is moving forward, however painfully, towards becoming a peaceful participant in twenty-first-century Europe.

In the ten years since Dayton—the name of the city has become not only a simple shorthand for the entire Bosnian peace process, but an internationally understood metaphor for taking an aggressive, engaged approach to conflict resolution—there have been numerous negotiations in conflict areas around the world which have not been successful, most notably of course, in the Middle East. Dayton, therefore, has contemporary relevance not because of the inherent drama in the negotiation—although there was plenty of that—but because it succeeded; in short, it ended a war.

By the time negotiations began behind a high barbed-wire fence at the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base on November 1, 1995, the Bosnian war had become the worst in Europe since 1945, posing a real and present threat to the stability of post-Cold War Europe. Parts of Bosnia were becoming a sanctuary for Islamic terrorists, some of whom belonged to an organization whose name was still unknown in the West, Al-Qaeda. Criminal gangs ran much of the country, sometimes pretending to be nationalist movements. The Bosnian Serbs were openly seeking the destruction of Europe's largest Muslim community in an ancient homeland—a clear case of genocide. And most Bosnian Croats would not have objected if the Serbs had succeeded. A “war within a war” between Croats and Muslims had destroyed most of the once beautiful medieval city of Mostar and its historic bridge. Refugees by the hundreds of thousands had fled to Western Europe, overburdening the resources of countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and Austria.

Yet, for the four preceding years, the European Union and the United States had done little to stop the war. Their mediation efforts were puny and poorly coordinated; NATO was involved only as an accessory to a pathetic UN effort, which the UN's own Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, did everything he could to hamper and undermine. Both Washington and Brussels refused to even threaten, let alone use, decisive force against Bosnian Serb

aggression. In 1993, when President Clinton briefly considered a more aggressive policy (as he had called for as a candidate the previous year), a majority of Congress, as well as most of the American military, led by a towering Washington figure, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell, arrayed themselves in opposition. Even after the Dayton Accords ended the fighting almost three years later, an overwhelming majority of the American public still opposed using U.S. troops to help enforce the peace and there were predictions, many from leaders of the foreign policy elite, that Dayton would fail, and that in any case it was not worth its risks and costs.

My generation had been taught in school that Munich and the Holocaust were the benchmark horrors of the 1930s. Leaders of the Atlantic alliance had repeatedly pledged it would never happen again. Yet between 1991 and 1995 it *did* happen again—not only in the Balkans, but also in Rwanda, where an even greater number of people—an estimated 800,000—were killed for purely ethnic reasons in an even shorter period of time.

Bosnia was, as I wrote at the time, “the greatest collective security failure of the West [in Europe] since the 1930s.” Rwanda was even worse. How could all this have happened at the end of the twentieth century, in the middle of Europe—and could it happen again?

BOSNIA CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD except in its precise historical context: the pre–September 11, 2001, world. In the decade before 9/11, Americans had turned away from the outside world after 60 years of continuous and expensive international involvement, from Pearl Harbor to the disintegration of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. Americans were proud, of course, that their sacrifices had succeeded in defeating both fascism and communism during that long period, but they were exhausted and ready to turn inward.

Of course, we will never know what America would have done if Bosnia had occurred after September 11, 2001—9/11 made Americans far more willing to support American military interventions in faraway lands, not only in a situation as clear-cut as Afghanistan, but even in Iraq, which had no involvement in the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. But, as Derek Chollet reminds us in this book, we are dealing here with pre–9/11 realities. It was not a coincidence that the three greatest disasters of international peacekeeping, disasters that almost brought the United Nations down—Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia—all occurred in the decade between the end of the Cold War and 9/11; call it, if you will, “the interwar years.”

Sometimes, however, a horrific event can force even the most reluctant people to action. In the summer of 1995, over 7,000 Muslims, including some women and children, were butchered in an isolated town in eastern Bosnia called Srebrenica, while UN peacekeepers from The Netherlands stood by helplessly and NATO refused to intervene. I argued then, and still believe today, that NATO airstrikes would have stopped the Bosnian Serbs, who preferred long-range artillery and short-range murder to anything resembling a real military operation. But London, Paris, and The Hague were fearful for the safety of their own troops, and refused suggestions for military actions until their forces had left the three “safe areas” they had pledged to protect.

President Clinton recognized immediately that, although the American people still would not like it, the United States could no longer avoid involvement. His choice boiled down to this: either assist the UN peacekeeping force in a humiliating withdrawal, or else make an all out American effort to end the war on terms that protected the beleaguered Muslim community.

So in August 1995, President Clinton launched the diplomatic effort described in vivid detail in this book. It must be stressed that, at the time we began our shuttle diplomacy, no one in Washington imagined that the diplomatic effort would be accompanied by a NATO bombing campaign. That was a result of two events that occurred in the first few days of our travels: the death on Mount Igman on August 19 of three of the five members of my original negotiating team—Bob Frasure, Joe Krusel, and Nelson Drew—and the Sarajevo marketplace shelling nine days later. These two events rocked the administration (the men who died were extremely popular in Washington, and we paid them emotional farewells at Arlington Cemetery), and changed, in intangible ways, Washington's sense of personal involvement in the war. After the funerals, President Clinton immediately sent me back to the Balkans with a new team, including then Lt. General Wesley Clark, my military advisor and original team member who represented the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Chris Hill, a State Department colleague then on the cusp of a brilliant diplomatic career; Jim Pardew, a tough former Army officer representing the civilian side of the Pentagon; then Brigadier General Donald Kerrick, representing the White House; and Roberts Owen, our wise legal advisor whom we affectionately called "mad dog."

WHAT IS REMARKABLE, especially in hindsight, is that strong political opposition to putting American resources, especially troops, into Bosnia continued even after a combination of American airpower and American leadership brought the war to a negotiated conclusion at Dayton. Despite this agreement, which achieved all of the primary objectives of the United States and Europe, there were questions from almost every quarter of the American body politic about President Clinton's decision to send 20,000 American troops to Bosnia as part of the 60,000-strong NATO implementing force. In a national poll taken right after Dayton, only 36 percent of the American public supported sending troops; it was by far the lowest support that President Clinton had on any issue at that time.

Opposition to the deployment was fueled by widespread predictions that Dayton would fail, and that, after the disastrous and bloody experience of the UN peacekeeping force in Bosnia, American casualties would be similarly heavy. "It's not going to work," said America's most respected senior statesman, Henry Kissinger, summarizing a widely held view just after the agreement had been signed. "When you're asking Americans to die, you have to be able to explain it in terms of the national interest. I see no vital United States interest to support a combat mission there." A month later, Kissinger changed his position, but only slightly. "The only valid purpose for American troops in there," he said, "is to move into a demilitarized zone between the

warring parties. . . . We should not risk American lives in nation-building, peacemaking, creating political institutions.” His comments were echoed by many on both the liberal and conservative sides of the political spectrum.¹

The opposition did not let up. In a stunning repudiation of the Administration, the House of Representatives—Newt Gingrich’s House, with its Contract for America calling for a strong American national security policy—approved by a lopsided vote of 287 to 141 a bizarre resolution opposing the President’s Bosnia policy but “supporting the troops.”² During the debate, members of Congress waved copies of *Time* Magazine, its cover story captioned, “Is Bosnia worth dying for?” In a comment typical of the hostility among most Republicans,³ Senator Phil Gramm from Texas attacked the Dayton agreement almost as soon as it was signed. “Adding American names to the casualty lists cannot save Bosnia,” he said.

There was also trouble in the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense Bill Perry publicly predicted casualties on roughly the same scale as the 1991 war against Iraq, or the failed UN peacekeeping mission in Bosnia. The American military feared Bosnia would be another quagmire. For the older officers, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff themselves, Vietnam was a distant but ever present ghost. (My own three years there, as a Foreign Service Officer working on the pacification effort in the Mekong Delta and Saigon, had marked me deeply, but I felt that the differences between Vietnam and Bosnia were fundamental.) The most notable exceptions were Wesley Clark, who had very close ties to Powell’s successor as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General John Shalikashvili, and Donald Kerrick, then on the NSC staff. Clark and Kerrick understood the issues well, and argued courageously with officers senior in rank over the need for very strong “rules of engagement” for NATO.

It therefore took real political courage for President Clinton to send American troops to Bosnia. This was the most important decision in regard to Europe of his presidency; opposed, incidentally, by most of his political advisors. Bill Clinton has not received as much credit as he deserves for this classic Commander-in-Chief decision, which he made alone, without Congressional support, and only reluctant backing from the Pentagon. But it worked; without those 20,000 troops, Bosnia would not have survived, several million refugees would still be wandering the face of Western Europe today, a criminal state would be in power in parts of Bosnia itself—and we would probably have fought Operation Enduring Freedom not only in Afghanistan but also in the deep ravines and dangerous hills of central Bosnia.

LARGE NUMBERS OF BODY BAGS—as always, the exact number was a closely guarded military secret—had been prepared for the casualties that the Pentagon believed were certain to come. But in the end, *none* of the body bags were ever used for combat related deaths; not one NATO soldier was killed from hostile action in Bosnia. This was due, in large part, to the authority given to NATO in the Dayton agreement: to shoot first and ask questions later—the exact opposite of the sorry rules of engagement under which the UN peacekeeping mission had operated and suffered so many casualties.

NATO was thus respected from the very beginning—a vital lesson, I hope, for any future operations involving international peacekeepers.

SEVEN YEARS AGO, I wrote, “On paper, Dayton was a good agreement; it ended the war and established a single multiethnic country. But countless peace agreements have survived only in history books as case studies in failed expectations. The results of the international effort to implement Dayton would determine its true place in history.”

Events since support this view. *Vigorous implementation is the key to the success of any ceasefire or peace agreement.* One cannot depend on the voluntary compliance or goodwill of recently warring parties. Force must be used, if necessary (and better early than late) to demonstrate that the agreement must be respected and will be enforced. And while Bosnia is at peace today and moving slowly forward, it would be in much better shape if the initial implementation effort had been more aggressive. “The start,” as I wrote at the time, “was rocky.”

The international community, including, I regret to say, NATO, did not use its authority enough in the crucial initial phase, the months right after Dayton. NATO was fine in force protection—that is, protecting itself—an important and necessary goal, particularly if compared to the substantial American casualties suffered in Afghanistan and Iraq. But several failures of the NATO command left a permanent mark on the land, inhibiting more rapid progress even today. The first and most important was the failure not to seek the immediate arrest of the two leading Bosnian Serb war criminals, Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic. These two men, who were still at large ten years later, were most vulnerable right after Dayton, but the opportunity was essentially lost after the NATO commander in Bosnia, U.S. Admiral Leighton Smith, told Bosnian Serb television, “I don’t have the authority to arrest anybody.” This statement, which was a deliberately incorrect reading of his authority under Dayton, constituted a devastating invitation to Karadzic to resume his political activities, which he did with a vengeance until a subsequent agreement, which I negotiated in the summer of 1996, finally drove him underground. Incredibly, as of the summer of 2005, Karadzic was still moving secretly across the Balkans, supported and hidden by a network of Serb sympathizers that undoubtedly included core members of his political party, the SDS as well as hard-core monks in the Serb church. His continued freedom, no matter how constrained, was a daily challenge to progress in Bosnia. (After President Clinton left office, he told me that he considered Smith’s behavior to have verged on “insubordination.”)

The lesson is, I hope, clear: once the United States is committed in such a perilous project, it cannot afford halfway, tentative measures—“in for a dime, in for a dollar,” sums it up accurately. To this day, this lesson has not been applied adequately in the Balkans.

IN HINDSIGHT, there were many other things we could have done better before, during, and after Dayton. I still regret, for example, agreeing to let

the Bosnian Serbs keep the name “Republika Srpska” for their entity. Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic was right when he told me it was a “Nazi name”; we should have tried harder to change it, for practical and symbolic reasons. On the other hand, I should not have acceded to a strange Izetbegovic request, nine months after Dayton, to allow the SDS (Karadzic’s party) to remain a legal party. Instead, we should have disenfranchised it before the first Bosnian elections in September 1996, despite Izetbegovic’s statement to me that, while he hated the SDS, he “could work with them.” Two weeks before he died, lying in a hospital bed in Sarajevo in October 2003, he told me that he thought I was “joking [in 1996] about dismantling the SDS.” If that was the real reason for his position against shutting down that criminal party, it was a costly misunderstanding. The SDS has been the main promoter of divisive ethnic politics in Bosnia, while providing the core of the network that has protected Karadzic. If we had banned it and forced it underground, things would be better today, even if parts of it resurfaced under a different name.

A serious mistake was permitting one country to have three armies. It is obvious that such a situation cannot be allowed in a single country. But in 1995, NATO refused to accept responsibility for dismantling the three ethnic armies and creating a single, integrated force, something General Clark and I thought was eminently possible. Yet the NATO high command inaccurately thought it would be dangerous work and refused to allow it in the Dayton agreement. In recent years, NATO belatedly recognized the necessity of dealing with this problem, and has begun slowly to integrate the army, creating a single defense ministry and an integrated senior staff and command. But under the 2005 reorganization, units are still organized on an ethnic basis at the battalion level. This is not a true solution to the problem. The military—and the police, whose reform has been even more difficult—must eventually be organized without regard to ethnicity down to the lowest levels if Bosnia is ever to function without an international security force.

At the end of 2004 that international security presence was transformed from a NATO force (SFOR) into a European Union force (EUFOR). This received almost no attention in the United States, and not much in Europe. But it represented a major evolution, not only in Bosnia but in regard to the NATO–EU relationship. I felt at the time that NATO’s departure (except for a small NATO “office”) should not have taken place until Karadzic and Mladic were in custody. Yet the pressure of deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan far larger and longer than anticipated was taking its toll on the American military, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld insisted on the change, despite quiet misgivings expressed by Bosnians. Ironically, the change also suited the long-term French goal of reducing the EU’s dependency on NATO, and thus made Rumsfeld and French President Jacques Chirac unlikely bedfellows on this issue. EUFOR deserves close study to see if it works, but its initial affect was clearly unfortunate: it left the impression that the United States, the only power universally respected in the Balkans, was starting to depart, thus giving encouragement to the obstructionists in Srpska and weakening moderates everywhere.

In the spring of 2005, the new Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, placed Balkan policy (including Kosovo) in the hands of her Undersecretary of State, Nicholas Burns, a highly capable professional diplomat who had been at Dayton. This upgrading of the importance of the region—which Rice and Burns confirmed to me in private meetings—was welcome news in a region that respects the United States above all other nations, because without a revitalized American policy, Bosnia and Kosovo will drift aimlessly.

I HOPE STUDENTS of conflict resolution will examine the Dayton negotiations carefully, not because they were successful, but to learn what might be applied to other problems. Of course, few other negotiators will have the added leverage that comes with bombing one of the parties, and not all negotiators will be able to lock up the leaders of the contending sides on an American military base. But much can be accomplished without such unusual incentives. To me, the key ingredient is leadership—determined leadership from the world's leading nation, with the clear backing of its allies. Assembling and holding together a coalition of friends is sometimes harder than fighting an enemy, as the current U.S. Administration learned in Iraq. It is often forgotten that it was not easy in Bosnia either; as this book shows, frictions within the Contact Group and the NATO alliance were at times almost unbearable. But the effort has to be made, for the returns are enormous, especially when there is an expectation that other countries will foot the larger part of the reconstruction or nonmilitary bill. This was, of course, the case in Bosnia, as it is in most other parts of the world today, notably including Africa.

It was a huge honor to be part of the team that ended the war in Bosnia—and to have a role in the dramatic events that Derek Chollet skillfully chronicles in the pages to follow. Like the band of brothers Henry V spoke to before the battle of Agincourt, whatever else we do, each of us will remember those amazing days for the rest of our lives.

TEN YEARS AFTER SREBRENICA, on July 11, 2005, I found myself back in that valley of evil, as part of the official American delegation appointed by President George W. Bush to represent the nation. It was a moving moment; I walked through muddy hills under a leaden sky as widows and mothers buried almost 700 recently identified remains, their grief undiminished by a decade.

But there had definitely been progress. When I had last visited Srebrenica five years before, ten brave—one might say, recklessly brave—Muslim families had returned, living among 12,000 Serbs who had taken over old Muslim houses. By July 2005, however, over 4,000 Muslims had returned and an equal number of Serbs had left. This was astonishing, and more of the same seemed certain if the international community stayed involved.

It was also a day filled with irony and high drama. From Belgrade and Banja Luka came senior Serb leaders who laid wreaths at the memorial, an appropriate silent acknowledgment of a great war crime. Our route into

Srebrenica, and the security itself, was the responsibility of the entity we were in, which happened to be the Republika Srpska. The police—presumably including some who had been involved in the murderous events of 1995—were respectful, if not exactly enthusiastic; they saluted as we passed and, more importantly, treated the endless line of victim families with correct politeness. An event that could have exploded into violence was incident-free (although a large bomb had been found at the site a few days earlier).

Unfortunately, it was also a day for hypocrisy. Senior European, American, and international officials spoke, some apologizing for the past failures, all pledging, as usual, that it must never ever happen again—and that the hunt for Karadzic and Mladic would be pursued with implacable determination. Then they got into their sedans and helicopters and went home.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the story of how the United States led the effort to end the Bosnian war and forge the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995. It is an account of high-stakes international diplomacy, the pressure-cooker of complex negotiations, and the pushing and pulling of Washington's intense bureaucratic struggles. It is also a tale of many extraordinary American public servants who reversed years of disappointment and frustration by working tirelessly to bring peace to Bosnia. Their efforts restored pride and confidence in American leadership. But most important, they gave millions of people in Bosnia reason to hope for a better life and an opportunity to build a peaceful future.

This book originated as an internal study written under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State during 1996–1997, as part of a special historical effort directed by the Bureau of Public Affairs and the Office of the Historian. This unique initiative collected and organized thousands of documents and conducted numerous interviews with American officials to create a government archive of materials concerning the Bosnia peace process. After assisting with creating a documentary collection of materials from the State Department, National Security Council, Defense Department, CIA, and other agencies, I wrote an original manuscript based on its contents, which aimed to shed light on the bureaucratic and diplomatic process behind a difficult policy problem and, eventually, a major success. The draft study was completed in May 1997, declassified and released by the Department of State in 2003, and is now available to researchers through the nonprofit National Security Archive in Washington, DC.

Based on these original sources, this book is a shorter, substantially revised version of the key decisions and events that led to the 1995 Dayton peace agreement. It includes many new insights and information from recent memoirs and studies, as well as follow-up interviews with several of the key participants—it is therefore a far more comprehensive account. The endnotes cite hundreds of documents that, unfortunately, still remain classified, and are therefore unavailable for other scholars to review at the moment (the citations themselves reveal no secrets). Although it is uncommon for a book to be based on still-classified records—and to provide specific citations of such records as sources—it is not unprecedented. Two other histories of major American diplomatic efforts, Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice's account of Germany's unification, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, and Ronald Asmus's book on NATO enlargement, *Opening NATO's Door*, are also based on government records that remain classified but available to cite.

Like them, I have tried wherever possible to reference public materials along with the official documents—and the vast majority of information presented here can be cross-checked with these open sources.

THIS BOOK WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN possible without extraordinarily generous assistance from many others. That begins with thanks to an institution, the U.S. Department of State, which launched the effort to create a documentary archive and oral history of the Bosnian peace process. This initiative serves as but one example of the State Department's commitment to understanding the past to draw lessons that, hopefully, can be applied to today's challenges. I am deeply indebted to my former colleagues who helped create the archive of materials upon which much of this book is based and who proved indispensable to the drafting of the original study. First and foremost Bennett Freeman, who began as my boss and editor, became my valued career advisor and colleague, and remains as all of these—but is most importantly my friend. Also, I thank Chris Hoh, David Goldman, Pat Attkisson, William Slany, Paul Claussen, Scott Zeiss, and Steven Engel for all of their help.

Several American participants in the negotiations read all or parts of the original draft manuscript, and their thoughtful recommendations and insights proved essential. Richard Holbrooke, Chris Hill, Chris Hoh, Rosemarie Pauli, Phil Goldberg, William Burns, John Kornblum, and Miriam Sapiro all read my work with considerable care. I am similarly indebted to Robert Jervis, Jim Goldgeier, and Melvyn Leffler, three scholars who generously provided their comments and suggestions during two lively day-long seminars to discuss the draft study.

During the long process of transforming the internal study into this book, I incurred even greater debts. The greatest are those owed to three remarkable American diplomats and public servants, Warren Christopher, Richard Holbrooke, and Strobe Talbott. They are central players in this story, and I am deeply grateful for all their support. Each read and commented on this book with their customary insight, wisdom, and sound judgment. By giving me the opportunity to work with them in government, and to assist them with their own books, I learned a great deal not only about many of the events described here, but the history and practice of American statecraft and the importance of public service. I am especially grateful to Richard Holbrooke, who has added his own important perspective by writing the foreword to this book.

Jim O'Brien's advice and wise counsel have guided me throughout the writing of this manuscript, and together with Mark Ramee, he helped shepherd the original study through the declassification process. I appreciate Bennett Freeman for once again deploying his editing pen with skill and candor, Debbie Isser and Laurel Miller for walking me through the thickets of post-Dayton Bosnia, and Jim Goldgeier for his return to service by reading some of the new chapters, and especially for his continuing friendship. Jason Forrester provided many helpful comments on several sections of the book, and Warren Bass helped me think about the triage of Dayton. Ivo Daalder's

own work on this subject has helped clarify my thinking about many parts of this story, and his comments on a draft of this book were greatly appreciated. My many conversations over the years with Ivo and other friends like Tom Donilon, Jim Steinberg, John Bass, John Norris, Phil Goldberg, and Ron Asmus improved my understanding of these events. I appreciate the support and encouragement from my colleagues at CSIS, especially Kurt Campbell and Julie Smith, who helped push this project across the finish line. Ashley Bommer and Loretta Graham were indispensable to moving things forward, doing so with good cheer. And my thanks go to David Pervin and the team at Palgrave Macmillan for their talents and, most important, their patience.

This book is far better because of this help from others, but its shortcomings are mine. And while based on thousands of the State Department documents and interviews with current and former government officials, the views, opinions, and especially mistakes expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Department of State or the U.S. government.

I would not have survived this process if not for the warm support, good humor, strong shoulders, (and technical assistance!) of friends like John Norris, Jason Forrester, and Adam Hostetter; my parents, Ray Chollet and B.J. Brittenham; and most important my wife, Heather Hostetter, who is my best friend and greatest love. She suffered through my distractions and helped in many essential ways, from editorial to emotional. Without her this book would not have been possible.

Finally, this book is dedicated to the memory of my friend Andrew Carpendale. We all miss him.

*D.C.
Washington, DC
August 2005*

Dayton Agreement Over Areas of Control, 27 November 1995



737766 #00389 11-95

Map

PROLOGUE: AMERICA AND THE BOSNIA NIGHTMARE

From 1991 to 1995, the crisis in Bosnia cast a dark shadow over American foreign policy. All other accomplishments abroad during those years were diminished by Bosnia's bleeding. This shattered the world's confidence in American leadership and power. It also spoiled the hopes of many for a new Europe and a transformed U.S.-European relationship. When the war erupted in 1992, the European powers saw an opportunity to test their mettle, and to increase the influence of their fledgling political bloc then known as the European Community (EC). As Luxembourg's Foreign Minister and EC President Jacques Poos famously said at the time, "the hour of Europe has dawned." Yet as time went on, Europe's response proved feckless, and the introduction of European troops under a United Nations mandate did little to stop the horrendous bloodshed. By the spring of 1995, as the crisis threatened to spin out of control, nearly 300,000 people had been killed, and 1.2 million were refugees.

The United States had initially encouraged the Europeans to take the lead in Bosnia—in former Secretary of State James A. Baker III's equally famous phrase, the United States did not think it "had a dog" in the Bosnian fight. American leaders were focused on other challenges like the end of the Soviet empire, the 1991 Persian Gulf war, the unification of Germany, and the Middle East peace process. They also failed to foresee how bad the conflict could get.

But in early 1993, the Clinton Administration took office, and it came with a new resolve—and the baggage of bold campaign promises—to end the war in Bosnia. President Bill Clinton described Bosnia as a measure not just of his foreign policy, but of what role the United States would play in the post-Cold War era. As his first Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, put it in February 1993, Bosnia "tests our ability to adopt new approaches to our foreign policy in a world that has fundamentally changed. It tests our commitment to nurturing democracy . . . it tests our willingness to help our institutions of collective security, such as NATO, evolve in ways that can meet the demands of the new age. . . . We cannot afford to miss any further opportunities to help pursue a resolution to this conflict."¹

Unfortunately, for the next two-and-a-half years, the United States did not live up to this lofty rhetoric. It missed many opportunities to end the conflict. Indeed, the American view of Bosnia during this period is best

summed up by another quotation from Christopher: it was the “problem from hell.” The Clinton Administration made several attempts to jump-start the diplomatic process. It pushed for NATO airstrikes to enforce UN Security Council Resolutions. It tightened the economic noose around the perpetrators. It worked with its European allies to help negotiate a settlement. But every effort, no matter how well intentioned, ran into the ceiling of political will. The United States did not want to engage in Bosnia if it meant accepting significant costs, whether measured by money, political capital, or especially American lives.

THIS DEPRESSING HISTORY makes the 1995 transformation of American policy—in which the Clinton Administration turned away from disengagement to use America’s military might, political prestige and diplomatic skill to forge the Dayton peace accords and a lasting peace in Bosnia—truly remarkable. A decade later, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the global fight against terrorism, it is indeed difficult to recall how wrenching Bosnia was, and how important Dayton would be not just for the future of Europe, but for America’s leadership in the world.

From 1991 to 1995, Bosnia was the defining issue for the United States in the post-Cold War era. For nearly three years, the Clinton Administration’s struggles with the crisis illustrated its own deep uncertainties, and degree of ambivalence, about America as a global power. Yet in the course of six months between June and November 1995, President Clinton and his team dramatically reversed months of indecision by setting a bold course, defying expectations both in the risks they undertook and the success they achieved. It is important to remember how and why they found this resolve, how they implemented it, and how difficult their effort proved to be. Because while many challenges now seem far different, the lessons from this story—whether concerning the use of force, managing the Transatlantic alliance, asserting American leadership to solve conflicts, or conducting complex international negotiations—still influence the history that is being made today.

YUGOSLAVIA FALLS APART

The Bosnia crisis began with the 1991 breakup of Yugoslavia, a country of six republics—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro—that had been cobbled together in the wake of World War I.² The small country sat at the intersection of three imperial expansions: Orthodox Christianity, the Muslim Ottoman Empire, and the Catholic Holy Roman Empire. For more than seven decades, Yugoslavia’s rich ethnic and religious diversity remained stable, led for most of that time by a single leader, Josef Broz Tito. Although a communist autocrat, Tito had broken with the Soviet Union in 1948 and enjoyed special status in the West. Half Slovene and half Croat, Tito himself embodied the complex unity of his country—it was often said that Yugoslavia had six republics, five nations, four languages, three religions, two alphabets, and one Tito.

Yugoslavia's troubles began after it lost its "one Tito." Following his death in 1980, the country stayed together by a fragile consensus of shared power among its six republics. Yet as economic hardship set in, its leaders turned to nationalism and accentuated ethnic and religious differences, and as a wave of independence movements swept across Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, pressures increased within each republic to break away from Yugoslavia. The first two republics to go were Slovenia and Croatia, which declared independence in June 1991. Fighting broke out immediately to bring these breakaway republics back in to the fold. In Slovenia, light battles between the Yugoslav national army and Slovene troops lasted for ten days, in what became known as a "phony war." As a Catholic country with very few Serbs (the dominant ethnic group in Yugoslavia), Slovenia had traditionally been the most "Western" republic and the most remote from the central government in Belgrade, so it was in many ways the easiest to let go.

Croatia was a different story. Unlike Slovenia, Croatia had thousands of Serbs that lived within its borders—Serbs who not only feared living as a minority under an independent regime based in Croatia's capital, Zagreb, but who aspired to live apart from Croatia as a unified "Greater Serbia." Intense fighting broke out between Croatian nationalists and the Serb-dominated Yugoslav national army, backed by Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, which aligned with local Serb insurgents within Croatia. The fighting was especially brutal as the Serbs worked to "liberate" their lands from Croatia. By November 1991, Croatia had lost two key areas to Serb forces—the Krajina region and Eastern Slavonia—in what to that point was the bloodiest fighting Europe had witnessed since the end of World War II.

Led by the Europeans, the international community launched a diplomatic effort to end the fighting or at least prevent it from spreading. The EC dispatched envoys to negotiate a cease-fire, which began at the end of 1991. By early 1992, the Europeans recognized the independence of Croatia and Slovenia. Also by that time, the international community had made two major decisions in response to the bloodshed: to impose a United Nations mandated arms embargo on the entire region, and to deploy 12,000 troops as part of a UN protection force (in what became known as UNPROFOR) to provide humanitarian relief and keep the peace in Serb-controlled areas of Croatia—nearly 30 percent of the country's territory.

U.S. PRESIDENT GEORGE H.W. BUSH and his Administration were happy for the Europeans to assume the lead in this effort, limiting America's own actions to little more than supportive votes in the UN Security Council. "During the summer and fall of 1991, it has been fair enough to give the European Community a chance to what it called a 'European problem,' " the last U.S. Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, later wrote.³ But as tensions simmered and finally boiled over in a third Yugoslav republic—Bosnia—the United States began to take notice. Bosnia was the most diverse republic of the former Yugoslavia (roughly 44 percent Muslim, 31 percent Serb, and 18 percent Croat), and many feared the consequences of its explosion.

In March 1992, the Muslim-led Bosnian government in Sarajevo declared independence, which both the United States and Europeans quickly recognized. Soon fighting raged between the Bosnian government forces and Bosnia's Serbs, headquartered in Pale, an alpine village that had been the venue for the 1984 Olympic skiing competition. Sarajevo came under ruthless Serb attack. Backed again by Milosevic, the Bosnian Serbs fought not to keep Bosnia together, but to carve out their own state (which they called Republika Srpska). They killed and brutalized thousands of Muslims, driving them from their homes in an effort to achieve "ethnic cleansing."

By the summer of 1992, images of Bosnian Muslim men in concentration camps shocked the world, finally forcing the Bush Administration to act. Bosnia had become, in Secretary of State Baker's words, a "humanitarian nightmare." Washington joined with the European governments to impose comprehensive economic sanctions on Milosevic's Serbia, cut off diplomatic ties, and organize a humanitarian relief effort to get supplies into Sarajevo. But they stopped short of any greater commitment—they considered threatening airstrikes against the Serbs, but decided that it posed too great a risk. Despite Bosnia's horrors, the Bush Administration did not believe that the United States should take military action. As Baker later wrote, "President Bush's decision that our national interests did not require the United States of America to fight its fourth war in Europe this century . . . was absolutely the right one."⁴

President Bush's opponent in the 1992 presidential election, the young Arkansas Governor, Bill Clinton, disagreed. For both policy and political reasons, he wanted to outflank Bush on Bosnia. During the campaign, he hammered Bush on his inaction, arguing that the President was "turning his back" on human rights and needed to show "real leadership." Clinton supported airstrikes against the Serbs and lifting the arms embargo to help the Bosnia Muslims, who were hurt most by the embargo because the Bosnian Serbs were supported by Milosevic. He promised that if elected, he would make the United States a "catalyst for a collective stand against aggression." After his victory in November, Clinton had an opportunity to put these words into action.⁵

A ROUGH START

Forging a tougher Bosnia policy as President turned out to be much harder than candidate-Clinton had imagined. The proposals he promoted met stiff resistance from the Europeans, who had troops on the ground as part of the UN force and were pursuing their own diplomatic approaches to solve the problem. After months of what Clinton's first UN Ambassador, Madeleine Albright, remembered as "rambling and inconclusive meetings about the crisis we had inherited," in May 1993 Clinton decided to pursue a policy of "lift and strike"—lifting the UN arms embargo against the Bosnians and threatening NATO airstrikes against the Serbs. He dispatched Secretary of State Christopher to Europe to consult with the allies to get them on board.

But Christopher's trip was a failure. The Europeans had no stomach for lift and strike, and the Clinton Administration had no stomach to implement the policy alone or risk rupturing Transatlantic relations. As Clinton put it, "we have bigger fish to fry with the Europeans."⁶

After this episode of what one historian describes as "blunderbuss diplomacy," the best the United States could do was to get the Europeans to agree to protect six UN-declared "safe areas" in Bosnia—Muslim enclaves threatened by the Serbs—with NATO airstrikes.⁷ UNPROFOR forces composed mostly of European troops would be deployed in these enclaves to ensure that humanitarian supplies could be delivered. Yet to extract European agreement, the Clinton Administration had to accept a complex arrangement for authorizing airstrikes, with the decision shared by both the UN civilian leadership and NATO. Under this "dual key," both organizations would have to agree—and therefore they both would have a veto—over whether, when, and where airstrikes could be launched. Under these convoluted rules, swift and sustained actions would be very difficult, and some feared that these "safe areas" would become little more than shooting galleries.

These new policies were tough to negotiate, but they did little to end the bloodshed. The war raged on, leaving American policymakers frustrated. Warren Christopher remembered that these early efforts to deal with the crisis "affected the course and content of our diplomacy there over the next two years . . . we kept coming back to the core questions about acceptable risk and political will." They might have wanted to do more, but did not want to do it alone for fear of undermining larger interests, such as the cohesion of the NATO alliance or the future of the UN. And they were unwilling to put America's own military forces on the ground. As President Clinton wrote in his memoirs, "I was reluctant [to unilaterally lift] the arms embargo, for fear of weakening the United Nations. I also didn't want to divide the NATO alliance by unilaterally bombing Serb military positions . . . And I didn't want to send American troops there, putting them in harm's way under a UN mandate I thought was bound to fail." With all these options off the table, Clinton admitted that after a year in office, "we were still a long way from a solution."⁸

PROGRESS AND SETBACKS

Throughout 1994, American officials struggled to solve these dilemmas, but still could not find the will or the way to do so. With such self-imposed constraints, they ended up just trying to make it through one crisis before bracing for the next. As Albright recalled, "we employed a combination of half-measures and bluster that didn't work." However, at times events forced them to take action, and they did have some modest successes. For example, in February 1994, the Bosnian Serbs shelled an outdoor Sarajevo marketplace, killing 68 people. During the previous two years, the fighting in the Bosnian capital had already killed 10,000 people, but this slaughter of innocent men, women, and children—the aftermath of which had been filmed by

television cameras and beamed around the world—could not be ignored. The Clinton Administration responded to this outrage by demanding that the Serbs withdraw from their positions in the mountains around the city or face NATO airstrikes. After intense negotiations with the Europeans, NATO delivered its ultimatum. The Serbs began withdrawing, temporarily lifting the siege of Sarajevo.⁹

No longer satisfied to leave the negotiating to the Europeans, the Clinton Administration also became more active diplomatically. This started with brokering an agreement to create an alliance between Bosnia's Muslims and Croats. While the Bosnian Serbs had successfully captured 70 percent of Bosnia's territory, the Muslims and Croats were fighting over what remained. The Sarajevo leadership deeply distrusted the Bosnian Croats, who were supported by Croatia's government in Zagreb. This had led to significant bloodshed itself, and it also further fueled Serb aggression. With a divided adversary, the Bosnian Serbs had little incentive to negotiate, and they pressed their military advantage.

The Clinton Administration believed that for peace to have any chance, the Muslims and Croats had to cooperate politically, economically, and most important, militarily. "From our perspective," Secretary of State Christopher later wrote, "the two sides needed to turn their energies against the stronger and more threatening adversary, the Bosnian Serbs." During early 1994, the United States worked intensely to bring both sides together, concluding an agreement in March to create a Muslim–Croat Federation. This Federation (which would have economic links with Croatia) would control about half of Bosnian territory and exist alongside a Bosnian Serb entity in a unified Bosnian state. Although criticized by some observers as a "shotgun wedding" amounting to "nothing more than a glorified cease-fire," the Americans believed that the Muslim–Croat alliance was the only chance for the Muslims in Bosnia to develop the resources to balance Serb power. While many questions remained about how the Federation would work in practice, especially with such deep suspicions between both sides, the administration considered this partnership a significant step forward.¹⁰

PRESIDENT CLINTON and his team also worked to forge greater international unity to solve the crisis. That spring, the United States joined with Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Russia to create a five-nation "Contact Group" to coordinate strategies and create a common policy. By July 1994, the Contact Group had come up with a peace plan and a detailed map that placed 51 percent of Bosnia under Federation control, leaving 49 percent for the Bosnian Serbs. Many of the specifics were left for direct negotiations by the parties, which the Contact Group would mediate. The Croats and Muslims immediately accepted the plan (seeing that they would get back nearly 20 percent of the territory they had lost), while the Bosnian Serbs refused to sign on without adding conditions that would render it meaningless. For the remainder of the year, the Contact Group struggled to get these