

## Chapter 12: Croatia's growing pains

After U.N. special envoys Carrington and Vance brokered over 50 separate peace agreements in Croatia that the Serbs quickly rescinded, Serbian leader Milosevic tenuously agreed to one more proposal. The media made Milosevic's consent appear as a magnanimous gesture. But Milosevic, ever the fox, knew that because his forces weren't strong enough to capture more Croatian territory and couldn't consolidate the gains they had already made; this last agreement would allow the U.N. forces to consolidate the gains for him.

By the time Milosevic had accepted Vance's plan for 14,000 U.N. peacekeepers to maintain the status quo, Croatia had begun to develop a more structured army and acquire some weapons despite the arms embargo. The United Nations Protective Forces (UNPROFOR) presence helped consolidate the territory the Serbs had conquered. But for the Croats, UNPROFOR bought time to train Croatia's fledgling army and amass more weapons, which proved so effective in the August 1995 counter-offensive. The backbone of the Croatian tank corps were tanks reconstructed from cannibalized parts taken from damaged JNA tanks.

After three years of inertia, UNPROFOR failed to implement even one major provision of the Vance plan, which had called for the return of displaced persons to their homes, the disarming of the Serbian paramilitary, and the return of Croatia's sovereignty over its territory.

When Milosevic agreed to the terms of Vance's plan, the JNA redeployed its heavy weapons and tanks to Bosnia-Herzegovina to block Bosnia's self-determination efforts and to further the goal of a Greater Serbia. The same cast of characters--General Ratko Mladic, Vojislav Seselj, and Zeljko "Arkan" Raznjatovic--all of whom had terrorized innocent civilians and wrecked havoc in Croatia, found no shortage of victims in Bosnia. The JNA, had UNPROFOR to patrol the borders along one-third of Croatia that the Serbs occupied.

When hostilities broke out in Bosnia, the media focused all its attention there and all but ignored the fact that the supposed peace in Croatia was being punctuated by death and daily Serbian shelling of Croatian towns and cities. Serbian ethnic cleansing in Croatia continued unabated under the watchful eyes of UNPROFOR.

Although the Serbs had committed grotesque atrocities in Croatia, nobody had anticipated the horrors they would commit in Bosnia. The Bush administration was unmoved by the human suffering. Democratic presidential candidate Clinton exploited the issue and made it a major point in his presidential campaign. Despite the Bush's administration seemingly resolute inactivity, the Croats and Muslims expected the United States to reassert its world leadership role and come up with a solution.

President Bush, however, was firmly committed to maintaining the status quo and letting the crises play itself out. Whatever could be said about Bush's policy, at least it was consistent and never disillusioned the victims.

After the election, once Clinton took over the reigns of government his schizophrenic policy became an emotional roller coaster for the non-Serbs. In addition to increasing death and destruction, the Serbian psychological warfare experts couldn't have better orchestrated the results caused by Clinton's vacillating. If his "policy" was, indeed, a conscious effort and not due to ineptness, then Clinton is in a moral equivalent with the Serbs.

He sent Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Europe in May, 1993, to unsuccessfully argue for the "lift and strike" option. Only after U.S. government archives are opened to future historians will we know whether Clinton ordered Christopher to deliberately present an unenthusiastic case or whether Christopher did so on his own initiative. Christopher's efforts failed, and thereafter the administration claimed that it wished to act in Bosnia but was prevented from doing so by the stubbornness of its European allies.

The Clinton administration, like the Bush administration before it, has engaged in its own transparent brand of revisionism. Patrick Glynn of the American Enterprise Institute has said that Secretary of State Warren Christopher's clumsy efforts to distribute blame for the war equally ("There are atrocities on all sides.") lacked the subtlety shown by his predecessor, Eagleburger, yet was equally inaccurate. Christopher's Balkan policy even provoked an angry memo from a State Department analyst. The memo, which was leaked to *The New York Times*, pointed out the blatant inaccuracy of the secretary's assessment.

The lack of principle in the State Department has moved a number of career officers to resign. Marshall Harris was the desk officer for Bosnia at the State Department. After serving for eight years, he became particularly disillusioned over Christopher's disastrous European fiasco. In fact, more State Department officials have resigned over Bush and Clinton's policies in former Yugoslavia than resigned over the Vietnam War under Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon combined.

As late as November, 1994, the West was pressuring the Bosnian government to surrender, while ignoring Serbian crimes against humanity. The West produced a variety of peace plans that, in essence, legitimized Serbian rebel gains. In August, 1992, and January, 1993, after the Croats dared to take back some of their territory, the West threatened Croatia with sanctions if it didn't withdraw to its prior positions.

Croatian President Tudjman was faced with tremendous pressure from the members of his own constituency who opposed continuing the status quo. During the UNPROFOR mandate, the Croatian casualty and body count continued to mount. But Tudjman's greatest pressures came from the increasingly vocal hawks in his own government who were angered by U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's early 1995 admission to the Security Council that UNPROFOR wasn't in a position to discharge its responsibility in Croatia and that its continued presence contributed to the stalemate. Croatia's economy was in a shambles. Because of the arms embargo, Croatia had to buy weapons on the black market and pay two to three times the going rate. Aside from the financial drain of caring for its own enormous displaced population, Croatia had to bear the cost of supporting a flood of Bosnian refugees.

After Croatia announced that it wouldn't renew the UNPROFOR mandate on January 12, 1995, Secretary of State Christopher directed more criticism at Croatia than he'd directed at the Serbs during their four years of rampage. In the words of that great American philosopher Yogi Berra, it was "deja vu all over again." Christopher was reviving his predecessor's technique of blaming the victims. He couldn't quite pull it off, though, because he lacked Eagleburger's deviousness. Christopher, who'd previously labeled the grossest Serbian genocidal acts "naughty," sharply rebuked Tudjman and warned him that he'd be sorry.

The State Department orchestrated media frenzy regarding Croatia's refusal to renew the mandate failed to bring to light the fact that UNPROFOR's seminal mission in Croatia was to implement the Vance peace plan--a mission it had failed to accomplish. Additionally, Croatia had already renewed UNPROFOR's mandate eight times, and eight times the West had miserably failed to fulfill its end of the bargain. The media shrilly castigated Croatia for upsetting the peace. Just whose peace they were talking about was unclear. Certainly the peace didn't belong to the Croats, who were subjected to almost daily shelling from Serbian artillery. Zagreb, Croatia's capital, lay a mere 30 miles from the front lines.

The only ones enjoying peace were the Serbian separatists who occupied one-third of Croatian territory. Prior to the Croatian offensive in July, 1995, the Serbs in Croatia hadn't been part of the war's statistics. Rather than printing stories about Croatian victims who desired to return to homes that the Serbs had confiscated, the media lamented how the Serbs would be inconvenienced if the Croats attempted to take back their territory.

Until the 1995 Croatian offensive, the Serbs in Croatia were crossing the borders of Bosnia with impunity to fight in Bihac. The Bosnian Serbs were especially interested in taking Bihac because with the city under their control they realized their ambition to join a Greater Serbia. Contrary to Strobe Talbott's statement

that the United States wouldn't accept the concept of Greater Serbia, the United Nations Contact Group (which included the U. S.) had already de facto recognized Greater Serbia as a fait accompli.

Despite objecting to UNPROFOR's continuing presence in Croatia, Tudjman bowed to American pressure less than 24 hours before the deadline was to take effect and rescinded his order not to renew the mandate. Having studied the State Department's psychological profile of Tudjman, Vice President Al Gore and Secretary Christopher knew exactly which buttons to push to change his mind.

Tudjman agreed to extend the U.N. mandate on the condition that UNPROFOR would patrol Croatia's borders between Bosnia and Serbia. But the condition was nebulous because its implementation was predicated upon the goodwill of the Serbs to allow it. By forcing him to change his mind, the United States had placed Tudjman in a precarious position. He had to justify his waffling to a parliament that wasn't noted for agreeing about anything--except, of course, his original decision not to renew the mandate.

When the West's provision proved impossible to implement, even the most naive diplomat realized that Tudjman wouldn't allow the U.N. another chance to extend the mandate. So the West came up with the so-called Z-4 Plan. The plan's signatories, the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations, hailed it as the ultimate compromise for restoring peace in Croatia. But a cursory examination of the document revealed that, in effect, it set up a state within a state. The plan rewarded the perpetrators of genocide and abusers of human rights with the right to institute their own judiciary, currency, taxation, police force, and to control natural resources and tourism in Serbian-held Croatia. The Z-4 Plan not only envisioned setting up a Little Serbia in Croatia, it also demanded that Croatia amend its constitution and laws to adhere to the Z-4 proposal. The plan hypocritically demanded Serbian autonomy in Croatia, but ignored ethnic Albanian demands for the return of their lost autonomy in Serbian-controlled Kosovo, despite the fact that Albanians comprise over 90% of that region's population.

During the time the Contact Group was urging Croatia to accept the Z-4 proposal, the Serbs had intensified their siege on all the designated safe areas within Bosnia. The attacks on the enclaves of Srebrenica and Zepa came to their predictable bloody conclusions. Despite U.N. protection, Bihac's population of 135,000 was quickly starving to death. With each passing hour it looked as if the city would meet the same fate as Srebrenica and Zepa. The U.N. openly tolerated a massive rebel Serbian military build up and allowed Serbian forces to stage attacks on Bosnian and Croatian towns from areas under U.N. control. Milosevic sent a huge contingency of Serbian officers, including Yugoslavia's top general, Mile Mrksic, and troops to assist in the attacks. Mrksic had commanded a JNA brigade during the destruction of Vukovar; in April, 1994, he was active in the assault on Gorazde, a Bosnian Muslim enclave. Western intelligence sources confirm that over 300 officers in Serbian units operating in the Western Slavonian region of Croatia were being paid directly by Belgrade. When the Croatian forces liberated Okucani in Western Slavonia in 1995, they found records of the names, units, and payroll records of at least 6 colonels, 7 lieutenant colonels, 8 majors, 13 captains, 9 lieutenants, and non-commissioned officers of the Yugoslav Army that directly linked them to the Belgrade government. Despite irrefutable evidence, including reports from U.N. observers that Serbia had sent over 5,000 soldiers, 25 tanks, and 10 PACs to the Serbian occupied territories of Croatia in clear violation of Resolution 988, the U.N. took no action. The U.N. ignored intelligence reports and objective evidence, as well as letters sent to Boutros Boutros-Ghali and Yasushi Akashi from a number of Croatian officials. They gave Milosevic the benefit of the doubt when he maintained that no JNA forces were stationed outside Serbia.

The Western powers even ignored statements by Milan Martić, the former president of the so-called Serbian Republic of Krajina, who publicly acknowledged Belgrade's involvement and influence in Serb-held Croatia. "...FRY (Serbia and Montenegro) paid all the officers (including General Mile Mrksic) that it sent to Krajina...No one in Krajina undertook any moves, even of the smallest nature, without informing or consulting Milosevic...I ordered the withdrawal of civilians into the depth of Krajina," Martić confessed. These revelations

(although they were widely known by anyone with a scintilla of background about the situation) came at a time when the Clinton administration was in the process of whitewashing Milosevic and talking about easing sanctions on Serbia.

In late July, 1995, a host of Western leaders stated that the Serbs had won, implying that the Bosnian government, which the West had recognized as a legitimate and sovereign state, had no choice but to take whatever peace proposal was offered. Defense Secretary William Perry said, "Serbs have occupied 70% (of Bosnia). There is no prospect, as I see it, of the Muslims winning it back." A few weeks earlier, British Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs Douglas Hogg urged the Bosnians to "acknowledge military defeat when it stares them in the face." The West's failure to support Bosnia's sovereignty tacitly reminded the Croatian leadership of its own precarious situation.

If the neighboring Bosnian city of Bihac had fallen to the Serbs, Croatia's security and territorial integrity would've been seriously jeopardized. Serbs from the Krajina area in Croatia had been pouring into Bosnia and joining their Bosnian-Serb counterparts in attacking Bihac. Recognizing that the Z-4 Plan would have only aided Serbian goals, Tudjman took matters into his own hands. In a lightning-like move, Croatian armed forces liberated Croatian territory (except for a small portion that abuts Serbia on its western border with Croatia) that had been under Serbian control since 1990. Unexpectedly, Croatia retook the Krajina with minimal resistance and casualties. Prior to the Croatian army's move into the area, the overwhelming majority of Serbs, both civilians and military, had evacuated. In contrast to the Krajina campaign, fighting was furious in the Petrinja and Glina, areas where the Serbian military put up a great deal of resistance. But the relative ease with which the "weekend warrior" Croats soundly routed the professional Serbs in the Krajina must have embarrassed the Western military experts who had championed Serbian fighting prowess.

The Croatian victory unequivocally changed the balance of power in the Balkan conflict. The victory relieved the imminent siege of Bihac and ultimately saved Western Bosnia. When Croatian troops joined efforts with Bosnia's legitimate army, the combined forces were able to recover 20% of Bosnia's territory from the Serbs.

Contrary to the shrill insistence of Western leaders that Croatian forces never should've crossed into Bosnia, the Croatian army's presence on Bosnian territory was legitimate because the Croats came at the request of the sovereign Bosnian government. Although the Croatia-Bosnia coalition had been brokered by Washington, the Croatian military's unexpected successes in Bosnia weren't acceptable to the British and French. As Croat-Muslim forces were taking back territory and rapidly closing in on Banja Luka, fear apparently rose among the British and French that the coalition forces might liberate territory that they had already committed to the Serbs. Western leaders turned a blind eye and probably encouraged the Bosnian-Serbs to use air power to redress the military imbalance. In an obvious attempt to salvage as much territory as they could for the Serbs, the British and French placed enormous diplomatic pressure on Croatia to disengage. A Serbian defeat wasn't acceptable. After all, why would they have allowed the Serbs to kill 250,000 souls only to have the conquerors' territory taken away?

The shift in the balance of power was decisive. NATO and U.N. military commanders expressed surprise at how rapidly Serbian defenses had collapsed. The Serbian defeat must have shattered the commanders' belief in Serbian invincibility and their notions that the Serbs somehow ranked as the greatest guerrilla fighters in history. Whether the Western military experts had based their pre-Croatian offensive assessments of Serbian fighting strength on faulty judgments or, had instead deliberately bent the truth to feed their political masters has yet to be determined. Why European and Pentagon officials, spearheaded by Colin Powell, told the public that fighting the Serbs would take 500,000 NATO soldiers is an important question to ask.

The myth of Serbian military strength, largely created in the Western military experts imaginations, has only prolonged the conflict. Most Western governments (especially Great Britain) condemned the successful Croatian offensive and expressed indignation because Croatia's success contradicted the mythology that had become sacred to those who advocated non-intervention and preservation of the arms embargo. In keeping with a British tradition of sabotaging any positive Croatian effort, British intelligence officers provided information to Croatian officials before their action in the Krajina indicating that the Serbian rebels were stronger than previously thought. At the same time, Canadian peacekeepers were providing information on Croatian troop movements to the Serbian rebels in Knin.

The Croatian success in the Krajina couldn't have come at a better time for the Clinton administration. The President's vacillating policy over Bosnia had angered Congress to such a degree that it overwhelmingly voted to unilaterally lift the arms embargo on Bosnia. The House vote of 244-178 clearly transcended party lines: 117 yes votes came from Democrats. Clinton vetoed the bill and then tried everything in his political repertoire to keep Congress from overriding it. Fortunately for Clinton, the Croatian offensive dissipated the showdown and alleviated Congress' political pressure.

While Congress and the Clinton administration were wasting energy on their confrontation over the arms embargo, the President had already given his secret blessing authorizing covert arms smuggling operations to the region. He wasn't simply ignoring arms shipments, as he would later claim when the information became public in April 1996, because his administration inspected the shipments in great detail, ostensibly looking for atomic, biological, or chemical weapons. Most likely, the true purpose of these searches was to do an inventory.

While arms were making their way toward Bosnia, Clinton's relationship to Congress resembled that of a philanderer to a cuckold. And like a cuckold, Congress was the last to know about an affair that seemingly involved half the world. Although Iran was singled out, such diverse countries as Hungary, Brunei, Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Argentina were also supplying arms to Bosnia through Turkey. The Clinton administration didn't object to the shipments despite the fact that the transfers were in violation of the U.N. arms embargo. Regardless of how the Bosnian weapons trade will affect Clinton's future political position, the shipments ultimately benefited the non-Serbs. The arms flow helped create conditions that relieved the Bihac siege and accomplished what diplomats had previously failed to negotiate.

The spin doctors in Clinton's administration worked overtime to exploit the Croatian success. From the moment of the initial JNA attack on Slovenia to the very eve of the Croatian liberation of the Krajina, both the Bush and Clinton administrations had cast Croatia in the same light as Serbia. Suddenly, like St. Paul's revelation on the road to Damascus, the Clinton administration did a 180 degree about face. Although Defense Secretary William Perry initially denied that the U.S. had given the Croats a green light for their offensive, he later--when he saw political advantage in doing so--suggested that the administration had at least given an amber light. The Clinton administration also failed to discourage unsubstantiated speculation that the American military played a major role in helping liberate Croatian territory.

Before the war, 120,000 Serbs and 102,000 Croats lived in the area called the Krajina. After Serbian ethnic cleansing, only 279 Croats remained in the same area. These statistics were never mentioned by the media when they complained about the Serbian retreat. Yet the Serbian exodus was voluntary, orderly, and preceded the Croats entrance to the Krajina. When the Serbs had deported Croats on a massive scale in 1991, the Croats had no choice. They had to leave all their possessions behind. The lucky ones were allowed to take only what could be bundled and carried. None were allowed to take their cars or tractors. During the Serbian occupation of the Krajina, 94% of the region's 158 Roman Catholic churches were destroyed or damaged. Out of the 122 Serbian Orthodox churches, 17 were damaged, but only one was completely destroyed. According to a September, 1995, communiqué from the Permanent Mission of Croatia to the U.N., most of the damage to the Orthodox churches occurred prior to the Serbian retreat.

The Serbs who left Krajina were neither victims of Croatian ethnic cleansing, as the media purported, nor refugees. Rather, they left of their own volition or under the direct orders and urging of the Serbian leadership. People who move voluntarily aren't considered refugees under international law. The organized manner of the exodus, which was conducted under the protection of armed Serbian military forces and confirmed in documents and supporting statements from top Serbian leadership in Belgrade press conferences, offers de facto evidence that the Croats played no role in the migration. In late August, 1995, members of the Knin leadership published documents in the Serbian daily Politka that revealed orders by Milan Martić, quasi-president of the Krajina Serbs, to evacuate. Another document, signed by General Mile Mrksić, called for the Serbs to leave the area before the Croatian forces' arrival.

Many of the Serbs had ample reasons to leave. Some had come from Serbia proper and moved into Croatian homes whose previous owners had been killed or purged in 1991. Another large number of indigenous Serbs fled because they had participated in atrocities committed against their Croatian neighbors. As most of the atrocities were committed in front of surviving Croats (a tactic used to scare the remaining Croats into leaving and accelerate ethnic cleansing), the witnesses were sure to return to their homeland and exact revenge. But the majority of Serbs left because of coercion from fleeing neighbors.

In typical fashion, the U.N. later wildly exaggerated the number of Krajina evacuees and incidents of supposed Croatian brutality. The U.N. High Commission for Refugees routinely inflates figures to receive increased funding. But in this case, its numbers game only served to further erode U.N. credibility.

According to a March, 1996, communiqué from the Permanent Mission of Croatia to the U.N., one Geneva based international humanitarian organization has charged that the Krajina Serbs "continue to live in a hostile environment where their physical safety remains precarious." The charges were based on reports from December, 1995, to January, 1996, when the organization "gathered a total of 67 individual allegations of incidents against the integrity and safety of people ranging from looting, harassment and threats of physical assaults and murder." This amounted to 34 incidents per 10,000 persons. Imagine the reaction of those who chastised Croatia for these horrendous statistics if they knew that the statistics for the same crimes were 61 per 10,000 population in New York City, 92 in Washington, D.C., and 143 in Miami. Perhaps the humanitarian group wasn't aware that every country has a natural rate of crime for which no government should be condemned.