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Analyzing and Understanding America's Foreign Policy Decisions and Strategies Throughout the Bosnian War

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of American foreign policy in the Balkans in the years preceding the Dayton Accords. Specifically, it examines the progression from America's position of nonintervention and reluctance to engage to a role of leadership in ending the conflict. Key factors discussed include the inadequacy of early U.S. policies in the region, mounting pressure to end the violent conflict, the value placed on the NATO organization and relationship by the Clinton administration, and the unwavering commitment to keep American troops out of the conflict. This paper seeks to highlight the intricate interplay between international commitments and domestic concerns, and applies what is discovered to other international crises, namely the Rwandan Genocide. The analysis provided underscores the integral role alliance politics and U.S. global dominance plays in the formulation and execution of its foreign policy.

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In an ideal world, sovereign states would interact in a way that promotes the rights of all and protects free and democratic institutions tasked with maintaining a functioning society. Various barriers exist to this kind of existence, and other considerations arise that complicate the existing processes. The years prior to the signing of the Dayton Accords serve as an example of the imperfections and complexities of American foreign policy.

Through the early to mid 90's, the U.S. struggled to develop effective policy in the Balkans in response to the war breaking out in Bosnia. But why did the U.S. change its initial position of reluctance to intervene to one of leadership in ending the conflict? The ineffectiveness of previous U.S. policy, the increasing pressure to end an extremely violent war, the relationship the Clinton administration valued with NATO, and the unwavering commitment of keeping U.S. forces out of the region shaped the final decision to pursue shuttle diplomacy to end the war in Bosnia.

Background

In understanding the U.S. interests in the Bosnian conflict, it is first important to examine the beginnings of the war and the role the international community played in its inception. The destabilization of Yugoslav politics due to poor economic trends and rise of nationalist groups in the early 90's led to the vote for and creation of a coalition government in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Lampe 2023). Instrumental to the downturn in economic stability and Yugoslav unity was the role the U.S. and the Western world played in allowing multinational organizations (International Monetary Fund and World Bank) to facilitate the transformation of a socialist country to one with a market economy and democracy (Petras and Vieux 1996, 10). Petras and Vieux write of multiple ways the "austerity measures" implemented by these Western institutions led to the conflict in Bosnia. Along with harsh measures that resulted in un- or underemployed youth across the region, the policies fostered feelings of desperation and anger, leading to a decay in social relations. The authors write that these conditions, combined with political animosity, led to the escalating tensions (Petras and Vieux 1996, 10).

The tensions between ethnic groups within and around Bosnia led to its severe vulnerability and threatened the emergence of conflict (Lampe 2023). After the U.S. recognized the vote for independence in Bosnia in April of 1992, Bosnian Serbs began firing on Sarajevo.

In a feeble attempt to prevent an escalation of fighting as it appeared Yugoslavia would break up, an international arms embargo was placed on Bosnia, weakening their military ability (Lampe 2023). Though the effort was intended to relieve heavy fighting in the area, the embargo became a contentious issue in the following years and was condemned as an infringement on the rights of nations to seek assistance for self-defense secured through UN Charter 51 (Karčić 2015).

As America was enjoying unilateral power in the world, they watched from the sidelines as Europe struggled to deal with the increasing tension and violence in the Balkans (Petras and Vieux 1996). Instrumental in the decision to avoid serious involvement in the region was the disapproval and uninterest the American public had in intervening. Petras and Vieux write, “No matter how much the mass media turned up the atrocity-laden decibels, no matter how much Muslim refugees dominated the war photos, the US public refused to be drawn in” (Petras and Vieux 1996, 16).

Through the early years of the conflict, the U.S. was reluctant to get involved, and its foreign policy largely consisted of quiet diplomatic talks and broad statements condemning the violence and calling for peace. The context in which the conflict arose did not present itself as an urgent matter to Washington, and Clinton held off in intervening in a major way until various factors made it nearly inevitable.

Argument

Though the American public support for intervening in Bosnia in the early 1990's was low, (67% in January of 1992 noting that the US does not have a responsibility to do something about the fighting between the Bosnians and Serbs) (Sobel 1998, 260), there were critiques of the lack of initiative the U.S. exhibited in preventing violence and human loss. Steven Burg and Paul Shoup write about the efforts the U.S., its European allies, and international networks could've taken to implement preventative policy. They name various reasons as to why international actors did not take opportunities, such as the support of democratic parties in Bosnia or providing help in developing power-sharing systems that could survive the Yugoslavian collapse, to set Bosnia and the Balkans on a course that would avoid an ethnic war (Burg and Shoup 2015, 4). They argue that it was a lack of Western interest and deep understanding of the issue that restricted the U.S. and its allies from getting heavily involved in the beginning years (Burg and Shoup 2015, 12). The Bosnian war seemed to possess little threat to U.S. power, making Washington more reluctant to intervene. The authors write that as the war raged on, the U.S. stance on the conflict only became a main concern when there was a threat to either U.S. domestic interest, or to the unity and structure of the Western alliances (Burg and Shoup 2015).

The resulting policies pursued by the U.S. in the early years of the war were weak and ineffective. In a *New York Times* piece published in 1994, Elaine Sciolino writes, "The Clinton Administration's recent shift in policy on Bosnia put senior officials on the defensive today and left them struggling to explain how their new strategy would end the war" (Sciolino 1994). She writes that Secretary of State Warren Christopher was forced into a position in which he attempted to reconcile contradictory views from Washington

(Sciolino 1994). He stressed that Clinton had not changed his policy toward Bosnia, while also portraying the position of Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, who claimed that a "Greater Serbia" which would include Bosnian Serbs and Serbs, would be supported by Washington (Sciolino 1994). Articles such as these serve as proof that not only were the administration's policies disorganized and ineffective, as observed in the longevity of the conflict, but that the American public was noticing these faults, and calling the administration out for it.

The administration had to reckon with the negative effect these policies had on their broader foreign policy reputation. The issue was soon described as "The cancer eating away at America's foreign policy" by Anthony Lake, Clinton's national security advisor (Daalder, 1998). In the same article by Sciolino, she writes that "A number of other senior officials are distressed that the wrangling over Bosnia has made it impossible for the United States to press its cause for NATO expansion and the strengthening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe" (Sciolino 1994). This confirms the fear officials had at the time that because of the lack of initiative and success the U.S. was having in Bosnia, the consequences would impact their larger foreign policy agenda. The realization by officials that the Bosnian war was going to be extremely influential in shaping the country and world's understanding of U.S. foreign policy and ability to maintain their unipolar position forced the administration to shift their policy to a more aggressive, active approach.

Even before Clinton was under pressure from Congress and the public to change his policies in Bosnia, he was attacked for his views on the conflict before he was responsible for making the decisions. The criticisms he received from Bush's campaign during the 1992 election highlighted the highly public nature of the war, and underscored the urgency with

which he would be tasked to resolve this problem. An article written by Andrew Rosenthal in 1992 in the *New York Times* illustrates the political tension Clinton's Bosnia policy was causing. He writes, "President Bush and his advisors today confronted…Clinton head on for the first time in foreign policy, opening the new front by calling his ideas on the crisis and in Bosnia reckless" (Rosenthal 1992). In piling onto the scathing statements made about Clinton's policy, Bush later says "The American people need to know that the man who answers that phone has the experience, the seasoning, the guts to do the right thing" (Rosenthal 1992). These attacks left the issue of Clinton's Bosnia policy open to scrutiny before he was elected, heightening Clinton's desire to end the war to save his reputation in foreign policy.

Senator Bob Dole and various others in Congress were committed to taking more immediate action in Bosnia and passed multiple bills "that sought to unilaterally lift the arms embargo on Bosnia" (Karčić 2015, 20). Many were committed to preserving and protecting the human rights of people in Bosnia and felt as though Clinton and his administration were not doing enough to address these issues. The demands of Congress also seem to reflect the beliefs of the public. Richard Sobel writes in an article titled "Trends: U.S. Intervention in Bosnia" about the opinions of the American public on the war in Bosnia and analyzes the trends observed from polls taken throughout the war. When asked whether the U.S. should send in ground troops to ensure food and humanitarian aid can get to civilians in the region, 67% of people polled favored this decision in early 1993 (Sobel 1998, 268). Though the public remained opposed to sending in troops for anything besides humanitarian aid throughout the war, (73% of people polled opposing the U.S. sending in troops to end the fighting in 1995) Americans recognized the humanitarian

crisis that was evolving and believed, as did those in Congress, that it was pertinent to address this issue. Despite the lack of support for more aggressive military action, the growing pressure to use military power to relieve the humanitarian disaster wore down the administration.

Just as Bush used Bosnia to attack Clinton's foreign policy, Senator Bob Dole, Clinton's opponent in the 1996 election, used the same strategy. An article written in 1996 in the *New York Times* describes the way in which Dole used Clinton's response to Bosnia to target his larger foreign policy agenda. The author writes, "Mr. Dole pointed to the conflict on Bosnia as an example of Mr. Clinton's mishandling of a matter that was threatening European security" (Nagourney 1996). The resurgence of the use of Bosnia policy as a political strategy furthered pressured Clinton and his administration to rethink their approach and find an end to the conflict before the election year.

Because of the presence of European troops and peace keeping forces in the region, and lack thereof American's, the U.S. and its European allies approached the conflict in distinct ways. The Europeans wanted assurance that the U.S. would not pursue any action that would undermine European efforts or endanger their troops.

Though the U.S. pushed to conduct NATO airstrikes, their proposal was seen as a contradiction to their unwillingness to put troops on the ground and as an antithesis to the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia trying to remain impartial and provide humanitarian relief (Burg and Shoup 2015, 414). Washington subsequently focused on maintaining alliances, containing the war, and preserving the territorial integrity of Bosnia (Burg and Shoup 2015, 212). This shift in policy arose from the necessity of Washington to prioritize its commitment to its allies. Clinton and his administration would

rather have maintained the NATO alliance and credibility than to risk it on the war. In an exchange with a reporter in 1995, Clinton states, “If the United Nations' mission does collapse, then I believe that, together, the allies should all vote on the arms embargo. That is the best way to keep the NATO position unified, to keep the world position unified, and to avoid overly Americanizing dealings in Bosnia should the U.N. mission collapse” (Clinton 1995). In this statement, he reveals his intentions to keep NATO united, and to put it at the forefront of his policy in Bosnia. This explains the shift in policy from one riddled with confrontation with European allies to a policy cognizant of the needs and demands of the Europeans.

As was observed early in Clinton’s administration, Washington was adamant to keep its military forces out of Bosnia at whatever cost necessary. Ivo Daalder, who served on the National Security Council for Clinton in the 90’s, writes that the situation evolving in Bosnia was one in which the deployment of American troops appeared to be the easiest and most readily available option. He explains that the reluctance of the Europeans to escalate violence by lifting the arms embargo or increasing the risk to their troops by conducting one-sided air strikes led to the conclusion that if the U.S. were to pursue any of these policies, it should be committing their military forces and taking on equal risk (Daalder 7). The administration felt strongly that putting troops in Bosnia would undermine their efforts to target the Serbs more aggressively and would unnecessarily risk the lives of Americans. An article published in the *New York Times* in 1993 details some of the reasons officials give as to why they were reluctant to send troops to Bosnia in any capacity besides supporting a peace agreement. The authors write, “‘If you send in forces to escort humanitarian aid, and the situation gets worse, you’re in a quagmire’” (Engelberg and

Gordon 1993). The threat of another Vietnam type military situation was weighing heavily on the minds of many in the administration and prevented stronger military intervention. In the same article, the authors write that the Clinton administration "concluded shortly after taking office that Bosnia's travail, though tragic, did not amount to a 'never again' scenario that morally compels America to intervene" (Engelberg and Gordon 1993). Though much of the world would have agreed that the atrocities in Bosnia necessitated more intentional involvement, the administration did not think that the conflict required the military force the U.S. could've provided to end the conflict.

Even as the conflict evolved and became more violent and urgent to resolve, the U.S. was steadfast in their refusal to send troops for any reason beyond enforcing a peace treaty. As it became clear the Europeans no longer thought the presence of their troops in Bosnia was sustainable, the U.S. acknowledged the possibility of the UNPROFOR forces withdrawal (Moore 2007, 84). If the Europeans decided to withdraw their UNPROFOR forces, it would necessitate U.S. assistance in conducting that withdrawal (Moore 2007, 84). The failure of the administration to follow through on this commitment would reflect that NATO was an ineffective military alliance (Moore 2007, 84). After the acknowledgement of the predicament Washington was in, the administration was motivated to prevent a UNPROFOR withdrawal. Moore writes that because of the situation the U.S. found themselves in, "The possibility of a UN withdrawal impacted the policy considerations of the Clinton administration and led to a more assertive U.S. role in the conflict" (Moore 2007, 85). The prioritization of keeping American troops safe and appeasing public opinion influenced the direction the U.S. took in developing policy in Bosnia. The administration thus shaped their

policy strategies and goals around the ultimate objective of ensuring troops were not deployed to the region.

After a long-winded effort, Washington concluded to pursue an aggressive diplomatic strategy, headed by Richard Holbrooke and his team. They were tasked with shuttling between Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, and speaking with the leaders of each, with the goal of a resolution. Starting in September, Holbrooke and his negotiating team took on the sole responsibility of the diplomatic efforts. Holbrooke and his team acted as a through line of communication and negotiation between the various parties, serving as a mediator over what decisions were made and what actions were taken (Karčić 2015).

Alternative Strategies

Though Clinton's foreign policy commitments evolved throughout the Bosnian conflict and were responsive to both the domestic context in America and the nature of alliance politics, there were alternative paths Clinton could've taken in his approach to Bosnia.

Strong and full force military intervention was one strategy the administration could've employed to quickly end the conflict in the Balkans. Thomas Friedman writes in a *New York Time* article in 1993 about the beliefs of administration officials on military use in Bosnia. He writes, "While the Administration officials insist they are not ruling out the use of force, they acknowledge that for various domestic and international reasons it is not really an option at this time" (Friedman 1993). In a subsequent article published by Friedman only a few months later, he spells out some of the concerns that would accompany U.S. military involvement in Bosnia. He writes that one major concern is that if

the military is deployed to Bosnia, Clinton then becomes responsible for the results of the war and will need to provide the necessary time and resources to win, regardless of the fact it is not on American soil (Friedman 1993). The result of the massive commitment Clinton would have to make to the region if he sent the military would greatly weaken his domestic agenda, something he wanted to focus heavily on during his presidency (Friedman 1993). The last point Friedman made was concerning the image of the president and the consequences of being indecisive and weak in the face of ethnic cleansing and extreme violence, eroding his reputation (Friedman 1993). As was quoted above, Engelberg and Gordon write in a *New York Times* piece about the threat of engaging militarily and being pulled into a quagmire, reminiscent of what happened in Vietnam.

The claims these authors make as to why Clinton abandoned his campaign promise to end the conflict with military force if necessary, provides insight into how image, historical trauma, and other priorities hinder these commitments. The culmination of these prevented Clinton from pursuing a more forceful intervention, and encouraged a diplomatic, restrained approach.

The question then becomes, why did Clinton and his administration not fully commit to a well-coordinated diplomatic effort at the onset of the conflict, and instead entertained various policies that were ineffective and weak for years.

Initially, polls taken on public opinion of the war indicated that the public thought the conflict was largely the responsibility of the Europeans or larger international community. Sobel writes, “A large and stable majority of Americans viewed military action as primarily the responsibility of European countries…or the UN” (Sobel 1998, 252). The

lack of public pressure to take charge of the conflict signaled to Clinton that he should not use time and resources on solving a problem the public thinks is not his responsibility.

Early on, the Europeans attempted to resolve the crisis on their own, to rectify the mistakes made when Western institutions intervened in ways that led to the transformation of the former Yugoslavia into a region ripe for ethnic conflict. Petras and Vieuz write that "Having played a major role in bringing about the war, the West Europeans…sought to impose a settlement that took account of the existing territorial fragments that were the result of the ethnic wars" (Petras and Vieux 1996, 16). The Europeans wanted to show their ability and power in this conflict, and not fall back on the unipolar power that was the U.S. The authors write, "The strategic issue was whether the European powers were capable of establishing their own 'security system'." (Petras and Vieux 1996, 16). Clinton and his administration, reluctant to spend too much time on foreign issues in general, were initially open to the leadership of the Europeans. As was observed later, the U.S. came to disagree with the Europeans plan and pursued their own policy. The months and years in between, when the U.S. deferred to European leadership, their policies were muddled, confusing, and did not lead to much success in ending the war.

If Clinton was reluctant to commit fully to using the U.S. military to end the violence, and was not willing to take the lead in diplomatic efforts early on to prevent a worsening of the crisis, why didn't the administration stay out of the conflict, as they did with Rwanda around the same time?

The eventual involvement of the U.S. in Bosnia was due in part to Clinton's campaign promises to resolve the conflict and show "real leadership" in the Balkans (Rosenthal 1992). Similarly, the U.S. was already committed to supporting the effort to end the war

even before Clinton came to office due to their NATO membership. As discussed above, if the UNPROFOR needed to be evacuated, the U.S. would be required to assist. The possible involvement of U.S. troops in the region necessitated a policy from the administration to either assist other NATO nations in ending the conflict or proposing a strategy to resolve the crisis.

Because of the context in which this war started, the U.S was not going to be able to ignore or dismiss it. The obligation to be involved in some capacity, but the reluctance to lead or develop a strong, workable plan led to initial policies that failed the region and the administration in their attempts to end the war.

Conclusion

In all, the chaos of American foreign policy during the war in Bosnia reflected the various issues demanding attention of the Clinton administration, and how the bureaucracy of the government prevented deliberate policy to be created and implemented. It is clear in the analysis of decisions made during the war that U.S. interests were dominant in the policy making process. As seen by the initial reluctance of intervention, Washington often put its domestic policies and alliance unity above other issues that may have a small or nonexistent effect on these concerns. The initial engagement only came because of the commitment the U.S. made to support NATO and the UN.

If this analysis is to be applied to other issues at the time, specifically the Rwandan Genocide, it is clear why Clinton failed to intervene and prevent one of the most violent and tragic conflicts in the past few decades. After research was done supporting the claim that

American military intervention would've saved hundreds of thousands of lives, it is logical to ask why that intervention never happened (Szandzik 2022).

The context of the conflict in Bosnia lent itself to more American focus, and the relationship between NATO and the U.S. necessitated their involvement. Rwanda, on the other hand, was a separate entity and appeared to many at the time to have little national interest in addressing (Szandzik 2022). Though in the early days of the war in Bosnia, the public was also disinterested in getting involved, the difference was the inevitability of U.S. involvement because of their commitment to NATO, and the choice of how to intervene, instead of whether to do it or not.

Clinton's indecisive foreign policy also characterized his actions, or lack thereof, in Rwanda, as he prioritized domestic policy and focused on cutting international spending (Szandzik 2022). This differs from Bosnia in that Clinton in 1992 ran on a platform of resolving the war in Bosnia, whereas there was no concern at the time over Rwanda, thus no commitment to fulfill once in office.

While there were voices calling on the administration to end the violence in both cases, the administration was extremely reluctant to call the events in Rwanda a genocide (Szandzik 2022). The failure of Clinton and his administration to label what was happening a genocide, Szandzik argues, kept them from having to "actually do something" (Szandzik 2022). Clinton's desire to uphold his commitment to be a domestic policy president overshadowed more urgent international crises.

Though many parallels can be observed in Clintons' handling of the Bosnian war and the Rwandan genocide, it still comes back to the domestic interests and security concerns. Clinton's administration purposefully kept Rwanda out of the forefront of their agenda, and

repeatedly downplayed the violence. The lack of initiative, leadership, and willingness to spend on international problems led to the delayed response and the failure to intervene to prevent the genocide.

What made Bosnia different was the alliance politics requiring Clinton to get involved. Clinton tried to leverage this necessity to act in a way that would reflect well on his foreign policy and satisfy critics of his foreign policy. The recognition of the violence in Bosnia and the urgency with which they wanted the conflict to be resolved was weighing heavily on the administration, opposed to the delay of Clinton's administration to call the acts in Rwanda a genocide. Clinton's desire to be a president focused on domestic policy resulted in disingenuous foreign policy, and lack of ability to handle more than one international crisis at a time.

Though the motivations of Washington and the Clinton administration are difficult to sort out, it is clear foreign policy decisions were made in a way that prioritized domestic interests. When it became clear the crisis in Bosnia could undermine U.S. leadership and power, Washington relied on alliance politics to support their effort to end the war. Uncovering the motivations of policy makers during the Bosnian war supports the argument that despite changes in administration, president, party majority etc., it is ultimately the domestic agenda and the reputation of the government in the larger global community that provides a framework in which policy makers develop and implement policy, adjusting and specifying depending on the issue at hand.

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