

Al Qaeda's goal in 2001 was not simply to conduct an attack on the United States. Its goal was to conduct an attack that would demonstrate America's weakness and al Qaeda's strength. Revealing America's weakness, al Qaeda believed, would undermine governments in the Islamic world that relied on their relationship with the United States to stabilize their regimes, in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Indonesia. Al Qaeda wanted to overthrow these governments because it knew that it could not achieve its goals unless it had control of a nation-state other than Afghanistan, which was too weak and isolated to serve as more than a temporary base.

The collapse of the Soviet Union obviously had massive effects on the international system. One was particularly surprising. A powerful Soviet Union and a powerful United States had actually stabilized the international system, creating a balance between superpowers. This was particularly true along the frontier of the Soviet empire, where both sides were poised for war. Europe, for example, was frozen into place by the Cold War. The slightest movement could have led to war, so neither the Soviets nor the Americans permitted such movement. The most interesting features of the Cold War, in fact, were all the wars that didn't happen. There was no invasion of Germany by the Soviets. There was no thrust to the Persian Gulf. Above all, there was no nuclear holocaust.

It is important to scrutinize the last twenty years. They are the foundation of what's to come in the next hundred years—and that is why I'll spend more time in this chapter talking about the past instead of the future. Think of the Soviet collapse as a giant tug-of-war in which one side suddenly weakened and let go of the rope. The side still holding the rope won, but lost its balance, and therefore the triumph was mixed with massive confusion and disruption. The rope, which had been locked into place by the two sides, came loose and started behaving in unpredictable ways. This was particularly true along the boundaries of the two blocs.

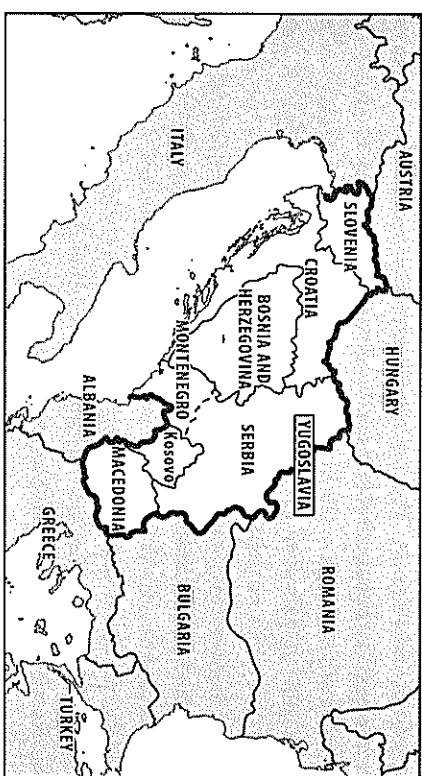
Some changes were peaceful. Germany reunited and the Baltic states reemerged, as did Ukraine and Belarus. Czechoslovakia had its velvet divorce, splitting into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Other changes were

more violent. Romania underwent a tumultuous internal revolution, and Yugoslavia went completely to pieces.

Indeed, of all the countries along the border of the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia was the most artificial. It was not a nation-state, but a region of hostile and diverse nations, ethnicities, and religions. Invented by the victors of World War I, Yugoslavia was like a cage for some of the most vicious rivalries in Europe. The victors theorized that in order to avert a war in the Balkans, an entity should be created that made them all part of a single country. It was an interesting theory. But Yugoslavia was an archaeological dig of fossilized nations left over from ancient conquests, still clinging to their distinct identities.

Historically, the Balkans had been a flash point in Europe. This was the Romans' road to the Middle East, and the Turks' road into Europe. World War I started in the Balkans. Each conqueror left behind a nation or a region, and each one of these detested the other. Each warring group had committed atrocities of monumental proportions against the others, and every one of these atrocities was remembered as if it had happened yesterday. This is not a forgive-and-forget region.

Yugoslavia shattered during World War II, with Croats siding with Germany and Serbs with the Allies. It was subsequently pulled together by the



Yugoslavia and the Balkans