CHAPTER 3

A Personal Prelude

(1992)

With other men, perhaps, such things would not have been inducements; but as for me, I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts.

—HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick*

A PRIVATE TRIP

ON MARCH 3, 1992, BOSNIA DECLARED ITSELF an independent nation. The United States and the European Union recognized it on April 6. Backed by Belgrade, the Bosnian Serbs demanded that Bosnia withdraw its declaration of independence. Izetbegovic refused, and fighting began, first as local skirmishing. The war had finally come to Bosnia, and with such savagery that, alerted by a few courageous journalists—notably Roy Gutman of *Newsday*, Chuck Sudetic and John Burns of *The New York Times*, Kurt Schork of Reuters, and Christiane Amanpour of CNN—the world woke up during the summer of 1992 to the fact that an immense tragedy was taking place, as the cliché went, "in Europe's backyard." An ugly new euphemism entered the English language, courtesy of the Serbs: "ethnic cleansing." It meant the killing, rape, and forced removal of people from their homes on the basis of their ethnic background. Both Muslims and Croats were targets of Serb brutality. But even with a new United Nations peacekeeping force that entered Bosnia in 1992 to assist in humanitarian relief, the catastrophe only worsened.

Almost by chance, I began to edge into an involvement in the region. In the spring of 1992, I saw the Bosnian Ambassador to the United Nations, Muhamed Sacirbey, on television calling on the world to save his nation. Impressed with his passion and eloquence, I phoned him, introducing myself as an admirer of his cause, and offered my support. Sacirbey thus became my

first Bosnian friend, although neither of us imagined that someday we would be negotiating together for his country's future.

Sacirbey was one of the bright hopes of the fledgling Bosnian government. Married to an American, he was until 1992 as American as he was Bosnian; his enemies in Bosnia attacked him for speaking his native language with an American accent. But when the new nation needed an effective spokesman at the United Nations, Bosnia's founder-President, Alija Izetbegovic, chose Sacirbey, whose father, a distinguished doctor in suburban Washington, D.C., was his close friend.

It was an inspired choice. The terrible television pictures from Bosnia were deeply moving, but Americans needed to identify with an articulate Bosnian who could personalize his nation's cause. I was only one of many who, moved by his forceful public appearances, offered help. Unfortunately, he was less popular with government officials in both Washington and Europe, who regarded him as inexperienced, even immature, when it came to serious policy issues. He loved journalists and television cameras, and often gave dramatic sound bites without considering their consequences. But he was fun to work with, and enjoyed a teasing, almost fraternal relationship with many Americans, including myself once we began working together in 1994. By the time he was promoted to Foreign Minister in 1995, Sacirbey was one of the two most important Bosnians with whom we dealt on a regular basis. The other was his archrival, Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic.

In the summer of 1992 all that lay in an unimaginable future. I was still a private citizen when, in early August, I received a telephone call from my old friend and tennis partner Winston Lord, who had been the American Ambassador to China* and was now vice chairman of the International Rescue Committee, a private refugee organization on whose board I also served. Lord asked if I would be interested in joining an IRC fact-finding mission to Bosnia. Within a few minutes Robert deVecchi, president of the IRC, called: Would I be able to leave within a week?

THE FIRST TRIP

We left for Croatia on August 11, 1992. Our core group consisted of deVecchi; John Richardson, an Assistant Secretary of State in the Nixon and Ford Administrations; and Sheppie Abramowitz, an old friend and refugee expert whose husband, Morton Abramowitz, had served with great distinction as Ambassador to Thailand and Turkey and was now the president of the

* In 1993, Lord became Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the same job I had held during the Carter Administration.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Abramowitzes and I had worked closely together on the Thai-Cambodian-Vietnamese "boat people" refugee crisis in 1979–80.

As we approached Zagreb, I started keeping a journal. Rereading it for the first time four years later, I was struck by how this trip shaped my subsequent understanding of the situation:*

August 12, 1992: We are going blind into a war zone, since almost no one has yet seen much inside the area, and then only in the last few days. We are going to try to get into the death camps that have gotten so much publicity, but this may be hard; it seems unlikely that the Serbs will let us see anything that further damages their already horrible reputation. . . .

ZAGREB: At first glance from a car, Zagreb looks like an ordinary Central European town, with an old section that evokes the Austrian imperial roots from which it came, and newer sections of ugly and banal buildings. At the Inter-Continental Hotel, we find the sort of scene that usually signals a story of high drama—an odd-looking collection of people congregating in the hotel lobby: a large man with a flowing mane of white hair; journalists; several Arabs or Iranians whispering to each other in a corner; military personnel in various uniforms.

August 13: After a day of briefings in Zagreb, I can see that the situation is far more complicated and more difficult than other problems I have seen, even Cambodia. It is the peculiar three-sided nature of the struggle here that makes it so difficult. Everyone says that most people did not want this to happen. Yet it did. Everyone says it must stop. Yet it doesn't.

The U.N. refugee briefing yesterday was depressing. Maps filled with the numbers of refugees in each sector lined the room. Our host, Tony Land, a bearded Englishman with a wry sense of humor and a keen sense of the impossibility of his task, gave us a fine explanation of the situation. But when we ask him about the prison camps, he surprises us. "We are absolutely amazed at the press and public reaction to all this," he says. "For six months we have seen Sarajevo systematically being destroyed without the world getting very upset. Now a few pictures of people being held behind barbed wire, and the world goes crazy. We have seen more deaths in Sarajevo than in the prisons . . ."

This turns out to be a widely shared view among the international field-workers. On one hand, they are right—the war is deadlier than the camps. But to the extent that television pictures rouse the world to attention and action—they are, for example, the reason we are here—the pictures of the camps will help Land do his job. . . .

Noon: The difficult trip to Banja Luka has begun. As I write this, we are sitting in a long line of cars and trucks at the Croatian border, about 60 kilometers from Banja Luka, on the edge of the "Serbian Republic of Krajina"—the Serb-controlled areas of western Croatia. The town just ahead of us has life in it, but

* The excerpts that follow are edited for repetition and digressions, but are otherwise unchanged.

an air of tension—little sound, no one raises their voices. A moment ago we heard machine gun fire, and smoke is rising in the near distance. Our driver has just nervously asked me to stop videotaping from our car window. The mood is subdued and edgy.

Five P.M.: We have arrived in Banja Luka after a trip across land wasted by war. There is no electricity in the town. Our rooms at the Hotel Bosna are small and hot. Heavy gunfire breaks out just outside the hotel. No one can see where it is coming from, and in the street people keep going, on bike or foot, as though nothing has happened.

Later: The afternoon begins with a scary incident—I am hauled out of my hotel room by Serb policemen because someone reported that I had illegally videotaped inside the U.N. warehouse. Stalling in my room for a moment, I quickly erase the offending footage and go with a young UNHCR employee to see a Serb security officer at the warehouse, Our interpreter-guide explains to the nasty-looking Serb security man that I am not a journalist, etc., and after an angry talk, everything seemed to be under control.

Our young guide illustrates the dilemma here. When I ask him what his background is, he says, "I don't know what I am." He goes on to explain that his immediate family (parents, in-laws, grandparents) is a mixture of Croatian, Serb, Armenian, Russian, Muslim, and Slovenian. "What can I do?" he asks. "I have three choices: to leave, to join the army, or to help people. I choose the third—for now. . . ."

August 14: An extraordinary day! It begins with loud noise and shooting outside our hotel rooms. We go outside to find armed Serbs conducting a "mild" form of ethnic cleansing right in front of journalists with television cameras. We tape the whole scene. At close to gunpoint, Muslims are signing papers giving up their personal property, either to neighbors or in exchange for the right to leave Bosnia. Then they are herded onto buses headed for the border, although they have no guarantee they will actually be able to leave the country. Some leave quietly, others crying. This is the end of their lives in an area their families have lived in for centuries.

After this terrible scene, which leaves us shaken and subdued, we pile into white UNHCR vehicles. A few miles north of Banja Luka, we begin to see terrible signs of war—houses destroyed all along the route. As we progress toward the front lines, the destruction increases. We encounter the occasional house left completely undamaged in a row of ruined ones—its occupant a Serb, not a Muslim. Such destruction is clearly not the result of fighting, but of a systematic and methodical pogrom in which Serbs fingered their Muslim neighbors. This is how it must have been in Central Europe and Russia a century ago, but now using modern weapons and communications.

We are guided through this horrorscape by a tiny and vivacious young Montenegrin from the UNHCR named Senja, who spent a year in Ft. Collins, Colorado, as an exchange student. Whenever we hit a roadblock, she firmly orders us to stay in the car and take no pictures. Then she hops out to talk our way past the awful-looking guards, lounging around with their weapons.

The men in this country act as if they would be impotent if they didn't carry guns. Weapons have empowered people who were until recently gas station mechanics or shopkeepers. I have never seen so many weapons on so many men, even in Vietnam and Cambodia.

We drive to Sanski Most, crossing a difficult checkpoint at a bridge. As we reach the local Red Cross offices, the most frightening incident of the day occurs: an angry-looking man in a sloppy uniform, wearing Reeboks and smoking a cigarette, starts yelling and waving a semi-automatic around wildly in our direction. He seems drunk. He wants to "borrow" our vehicle, then dump us at the edge of the town—or worse. After a heated argument, Senja insists we be taken to the local police station, where she tells us to stay outside while she goes in alone. For a tense hour we wait, watched with open hostility by the heavily armed men lounging in front of the police station. We worry about Senja, but finally she emerges from the police station, saying urgently, "We have to leave immediately. These people are very angry and very dangerous." And we take off rapidly for Zagreb, relieved but mystified. . . .

August 15: We have flown to Split. After checking in at a lovely resort hotel on the sea, we set out for a refugee holding area just across the Croatian border in Bosnia, climbing through a typical Mediterranean landscape, with steep rocky mountains, seaside houses, and small villages. The towns could be in Italy, just across the Adriatic, but the militia makes me think more of Lebanon.

We arrive in Posesje, a town just inside the Bosnian border. The refugee holding area is a dreadful mess. In a school and its grounds are about 3,000 Muslim refugees who have fled from Serb-controlled areas of Bosnia and were stopped by the Croatians from crossing the border into Croatia.

Under a broiling sun, with several women crying out their stories at the same time, the refugees tell us for hours of the ordeals they and their families have lived through. Women gather around to recount how their men are still missing, how they were taken away and never seen again. No young men around. It is overwhelmingly oppressive. We return, depleted, to Split.

For a change of pace, we go to the ancient Roman ruins, near the main street. At this time of year Split is usually filled with tourists, but now there are only a few, mostly German, who seem a dreadful, walking insult to the terrible events happening a few miles away. We visit Emperor Diocletian's palace, a small part of which has been converted into a church.

As we look around, an unforgettable scene takes place, in sharp contrast to the rest of the day. Two nuns appear and sit down at the organ. A young girl starts singing, rehearsing for a wedding. Her beautiful voice fills the little church, echoing off the ancient stones. We stop, transfixed. The horrors of Bosnia are both far away and yet right here. We cannot tear ourselves away. If these moments of love, family, and tradition could last longer, perhaps they could fill the space that war possesses in this self-destructive land.

August 16: Zagreb. Dinner is again at the buffet of the Inter-Continental, where we are joined by Steve Engelberg, an impressive *New York Times* correspondent. He offers some opinions: those who might replace Milosevic would

probably be worse; Vance did a terrific job stopping the Croatian-Serbian war; there is a serious danger of a European Islamic radical movement if this war is not stopped soon.

NEW YORK: **August 23, 1992:** The trip is over. As always, New York's problems are so demanding that it is hard to get people to worry about misery thousands of miles away. But I do not agree with the argument that we cannot afford to deal with these faraway problems when we have difficulties at home. Such thinking leads to an unacceptable global triage. Our society is still rich enough to deal with the outside world, even after the end of the Cold War.

The trip had hooked me. Not since Vietnam had I seen a problem so difficult or compelling. I told Strobe Talbott, then a columnist at *Time,* that if there were a change in Administrations Bosnia would be "the worst kind of legacy imaginable—it would be George Bush and Larry Eagleburger's revenge if Clinton wins." Before the trip, *The Washington Post* and *Newsweek* had both asked me to write about my trip. I was now anxious to do so. The *Newsweek* article, in the issue of September 17, 1992, marked my first effort to propose a course of action in Bosnia:

> By its inadequate reaction so far, the United States and, to an even greater extent, the European Community may be undermining not only the dreams of a post–Cold War "common European House" but also laying the seeds for another era of tragedy in Europe.
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> Not that such a dire future is inevitable. . . . If the Europeans and the United States act with boldness and strength, worst-case scenarios do not need to occur. . . . [But] if the war continues, and the Serbs succeed in permanently reducing the Muslims to a small state or "cantonment" within a Bosnia that has been divided between Croatia and Serbia, the immediate consequences will be terrible—and the long-term consequences even worse. In the short run, the Muslims will have been removed from areas in which they have lived for centuries, with countless thousands butchered, often by their longtime neighbors. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps over one million refugees will have been thrust into a world community already staggering under enormous refugee burdens in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. . . . Most observers believe that nothing is likely to deter the Serbs except actions that raise the costs of their genocidal policies to an unacceptable level.
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> What might this mean in practice? First, international (presumably United Nations) observers should be deployed along the borders and in Kosovo and Macedonia immediately, *before* fighting spreads to these two critical regions. . . .
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> Another possibility would be to change the rules of the present [arms] embargo on all combatants—which in practice heavily favors the Serbs, who control the old Yugoslav military-industrial complex—so that the Bosnians can obtain more weapons with which to defend themselves. . . .

Other actions, including bombing the bridges linking Serbia with Bosnia, and attacking Serb military facilities, must be considered. Such actions may well increase the level of violence in the short term. But since the West does not intend or wish to send its own troops into the war, it is unfair to deny the Muslims the means with which to defend themselves. . . .

Every day that the killing goes on the chances of preventing the long-term tragedy decrease. What would the West be doing now if the religious convictions of the combatants were reversed, and a Muslim force was now trying to destroy two million beleaguered Christians and/or Jews?

THE 1992 CAMPAIGN

In 1988, I had supported Senator Al Gore during the primaries, traveling with him from time to time. Although his campaign started late, it got off to an excellent start, but it ran into immense and, as it turned out, insurmountable obstacles when it hit the primaries in key northern states, especially New York, where I lived through some difficult days with him, his campaign team, and his close-knit family.

I told Gore I would support him again if he ran in 1992. When he decided not to run—in large part because of the aftereffects of an automobile accident that almost killed his young son—I was uncommitted until several close friends began to draw my attention to Governor Bill Clinton of Arkansas.

The first was Strobe Talbott, who had been Clinton's housemate at Oxford when they were both Rhodes scholars. Strobe, a friend since he had covered the State Department during the Carter Administration, could not get involved in the campaign since he was still at *Time*—but his wife, Brooke Shearer, went to work for Hillary Clinton, and traveled with her during much of the campaign. Another journalist I knew well, Joe Klein, then with *New York* magazine, later with *Newsweek* and *The New Yorker,* who had written a series of columns drawing national attention to Clinton, told me the Arkansas Governor was the most exciting Democrat in a generation. The third was Samuel Berger (universally known as Sandy), a partner in a leading Washington law firm and a former colleague in the Vance State Department.

I met Governor Clinton and his wife, Hillary, at several New York events in the early fall of 1991, and introduced him at one. After a breakfast meeting with a very smart and, it seemed to me, very young aide named George Stephanopoulos, I called Sandy Berger and told him I was ready to support Governor Clinton in any way I could.

Berger predicted that President Bush would try to portray Governor Clinton as inexperienced and unqualified to deal with national security issues—a technique that had worked well for Republicans in many recent campaigns, in-

cluding Reagan's 1980 win over Jimmy Carter and Bush's defeat of Michael Dukakis in 1988. To prevent this, Sandy wanted to form a small group to work on national security issues early. The core group Berger had in mind would consist of the two of us and his old boss from the Vance State Department, Tony Lake. Sandy thought that Tony, who was teaching at Mount Holyoke, would have more time available than either of us, and, if he took leave in the fall, might be able to devote all his time to the campaign while we assisted him. Lake was at first reluctant: he was planning to write a book about the campaign, not participate in it. Sandy asked if I would call Tony and help persuade him to accept the challenge.

I was pleased to do so. Tony Lake and I had been close friends for a long time. We had entered the Foreign Service together in 1962, studied Vietnamese together, and served in Vietnam together. Twice in our careers, with his support, I had succeeded him, first as the aide to the Ambassador in Saigon, then as an assistant to the number-two person in the State Department, Nicholas Katzenbach, during the Johnson Administration. I had been the head of the search committee that had given him the job as the director of International Voluntary Services, a small private organization similar to the Peace Corps. He had made the arrangements for my wedding, in Saigon, in 1964; I was godfather to his second child. If we were no longer as close as we used to be—given the effects of time and diverging career paths after 1980—we had remained in constant touch and worked together for thirty years.

Shortly after our talk Tony went to Little Rock to meet the candidate. The meeting was a success, and Tony quickly got started.

The Clinton campaign message was, famously, focused on the economy. Still, it was not wise to leave Bush's leadership in foreign policy unchallenged—a mistake that had badly damaged Dukakis in 1988. To deal with this dilemma, the team proposed to Governor Clinton and Senator Gore a two-pronged approach on foreign policy. On the negative side, they would criticize the Bush record; we did not think it as invulnerable as was commonly believed. On the positive side, Governor Clinton would present positions that would show him as slightly more forward-looking than Bush. As this strategy took shape in the summer of 1992, the issue that presented itself most starkly—because it fit both parts of this strategy—was Bosnia.

The tragedy in the former Yugoslavia was suddenly emerging into world consciousness. About the same time that I made my first trip there in the summer of 1992, the world began to see shocking film of emaciated prisoners in northern Bosnia, looking at the unblinking camera through barbed-wire fences, scenes straight out of World War II—yet happening now.

Governor Clinton attacked. Criticizing the Bush Administration for "turning its back on violations of basic human rights" and "being slow on the up-

take," he called on President Bush to show "real leadership" and urged air strikes, supported by the United States if necessary, against the Serbs if they continued to block the delivery of humanitarian goods to the people trapped in Sarajevo. President Bush fired back, attacking his opponent for a "reckless approach that indicates Clinton better do some homework." However, by early August, partly in response to the criticism, the Bush Administration had adjusted its policy, urging the United Nations Security Council to use force, if necessary, to deliver humanitarian aid to Bosnia. But Clinton pressed on in a speech in Los Angeles on August 14 (the same day, by coincidence, that I was in Banja Luka), promising he would "make the United States the catalyst for a collective stand against aggression." "In a world of change," he said, "security flows from initiative, not from inertia." None of this made much of an impact on the American electorate, but it got a lot of attention in Europe.

As I told Tony and Sandy, these were correct and brave positions, both morally and politically, and both men deserved praise for proposing them. There was only one concern, I said: Would *President* Clinton carry out what *candidate* Clinton proposed? Proud of getting Governor Clinton to take these positions, Lake said he was confident they would be part of the policy if Clinton was elected. With this in mind, after the trip, I wrote a memorandum to the candidates on August 23:

To: Governor Clinton, Senator Gore (through Tony Lake and Sandy Berger)
From: Richard Holbrooke
Subject: Former Yugoslavia

. . . Whatever happens the rest of this year, the next Administration is certain to be confronted with a problem of staggering political, strategic, and humanitarian dimensions. I therefore want to bring the following points to your attention:

1. The Bush Administration's reactions have been weak and inadequate. . . .
2. The attention of the press, the efforts of the international relief community, and the belated response of European leaders and President Bush may have slowed down the more awful aspects of the situation, but only slightly. . . .
3. Your public statements have made a real difference, especially in pushing the Bush Administration into doing more than they otherwise would have done. They have also been interpreted as a sign that, if elected, you will follow a more vigorous policy against Serb aggression, which is the right signal to be sending to all parties. . . .

This is not a choice between Vietnam and doing nothing, as the Bush Administration has portrayed it. There are many actions that might be done now, including: dropping the arms embargo against the Bosnians, stationing U.N. observers along the Kosovo and Macedonia borders. . . . Doing nothing now risks a far greater and more costly involvement later.

In the weeks after Clinton's election victory, I heard little from my campaign colleagues; people with whom I had spent hours were now closeted in transition meetings in Little Rock or otherwise inaccessible. Asked by a Washington-based representative of the Presidential Transition Task Force what I hoped to do in the Clinton Administration, I replied that unless offered the position of Deputy Secretary of State, which was highly unlikely, I would prefer to remain a private citizen in New York and undertake special negotiating assignments for the Administration—a sort of troubleshooter role. Ever since my experience in Paris in 1968 as a junior member of the Vietnam negotiating team under Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance, I had wanted to test myself against the most difficult negotiations in the world. At this time, I said, the toughest seemed to be Bosnia; I would be interested in becoming the American negotiator for that problem, a position that did not exist in the Bush Administration.

In those weeks Strobe Talbott and Brooke Shearer stayed in close touch. After Strobe turned down the ambassadorship to Russia for family reasons, the President-elect asked his former Oxford housemate to serve as a senior advisor on relations with the former Soviet Union.* It was a perfect job for him; he had unwittingly been preparing for it most of his life, studying Russian language and history, and writing a series of important books on U.S.-Soviet relations. I helped him draft terms of reference that would give him a larger role than that of previous senior advisors on Soviet affairs, a position that had existed in many earlier administrations, but always as a one-person shop. With the Soviet Union broken up into fifteen independent nations, the existing Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs could not handle the extra responsibility. We proposed creating a separate office to oversee relations with the former Soviet republics, closely linked to the old European Bureau. Despite some grumbling from the bureaucracy, it was put into effect over the next year under his leadership and with the backing of Secretary Christopher.†

CHRISTMAS IN CAMBODIA, NEW YEAR'S IN SARAJEVO

In mid-December, Tony Lake called to tell me that he was going to be the President's National Security Advisor. People who did not understand our

* Brooke Shearer was named Director of the prestigious White House Fellows Program, which she dramatically revitalized and revamped, making it more engaged in current events and more diverse in its selection process. In the second term, she became senior advisor to the Deputy Secretary of Interior.

† Because the United States had never accepted the incorporation of the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, into the Soviet Union, responsibility for them was left in the European Bureau.