

# From Decline to Disaster

(September 1994–August 1995)

We stand face-to-face with the terrible question of evil and do not even know what is before us, let alone what to pit against it.

—CARL JUNG

THE NEXT ELEVEN MONTHS WERE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT. Even as we made progress on a wide range of issues important to the shaping of America's post-Cold War relations with Europe—notably NATO enlargement and relations with the former Soviet satellites of central Europe—Bosnia continued to deteriorate, raising serious questions about the nature of America's post-Cold War commitment to Europe.

My first few weeks in Washington were dominated by NATO enlargement. After intense internal debate, we forged a position in nine weeks, just in time for Christopher to present it at the Foreign Ministers meeting in Brussels at the beginning of December 1994. We announced that NATO would begin a formal dialogue in 1995 with all potential NATO members and other nations affected by the decision, including Russia. Under our timetable, no nation would be invited to join until 1997, with actual membership slated for 1999. The process would be careful and methodical—too slow for those, like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger, who wanted NATO to accept new members immediately, and too fast for those, including George Kennan and Sam Nunn, who feared the effect of enlargement on Russia, and did not believe NATO should expand at all. Despite such challenges to the policy from both sides, the Administration stuck to its original schedule for the next three years—a remarkably steady course in the face of difficulties and objections from both sides. In May 1997, in Paris, President Yeltsin signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which established a new relationship between Russia and NATO. Six weeks later, NATO formally invited Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join, and kept the door open for other members later.

There were other achievements during my first year in Washington, including American-sponsored solutions or breakthroughs on several second-tier is-

sues that could have escalated into first-class crises. These included a serious Greek-Albanian border dispute and quarrels over political prisoners, and problems between Hungary and its two neighbors Slovakia and Romania over the treatment of their Hungarian minorities. With American encouragement, the European Union approved a controversial but important Customs Union with Turkey in the spring of 1995 and moved Cyprus into the first tier of countries to be considered for future membership. And under President Clinton's skillful personal touch, relations with Russia and its temperamental President moved steadily forward despite a series of sharp challenges.

But these steps toward an undivided and secure Europe lay in an uncertain and troubled future in the fall of 1994, when America's policies were facing great difficulties and challenges. There could be no time for self-congratulation over NATO or any other issue in the desperate nine months between November 1994 and the end of July 1995, as Bosnia went from low point to lower point, culminating in the terrible events at Srebrenica. The value of the Administration's other achievements in Europe would be dependent, after all, on what happened in Bosnia.

**Pinpricks.** At the end of November, the Serbs attacked Croat and Muslim positions in western Bosnia, using warplanes based at a military airfield in Udbina, in the Serb-controlled part of Croatia. This was a remarkably bold escalation of the war: not only was the use of an aircraft itself a violation of United Nations "no-fly" provisions, but these planes had crossed an international border between Croatia and Bosnia. From London, where I was at the time of the incident, I urged Christopher to insist that NATO destroy the Serb planes and the Udbina air base. The next day, NATO released photographs of large holes made in the runway at Udbina, and proudly announced that it had launched the largest air raid in Europe since the end of World War II. Twenty-four hours later it became apparent that the "massive attack" was simply a series of minor air strikes—later contemptuously but accurately labeled "pinpricks" by the press. The runway could be repaired within a day or two, and was. The United Nations, which had agreed to the NATO air strikes, reverted to its former passivity, and the Serbs prepared to wait out the winter before attacking again. It was a shameful moment that left Bob Frasure and me deeply distressed.

**Sarajevo.** In early January 1995, I visited Sarajevo and Zagreb. The trip gave me new insight into the political mess within Bosnia. The Federation—the Croat-Muslim entity that had been negotiated in Washington the previous March—existed only on paper, and friction between the Croats and the Muslims was enormous. Sarajevo itself was not under attack, thanks to a four-month winter cease-fire announced by former President Jimmy Carter after a

hurried trip to Sarajevo and Pale in late December. But President Izetbegovic told me that the cease-fire had been agreed to by both sides only because of the difficulty of fighting in the winter. He predicted the war would resume with even greater intensity well before the four months ran out.

Izetbegovic presented an astonishing picture of determination in the face of his difficulties. Sitting in his unheated and ill-lit Presidential Palace, its interior walls pockmarked with bullet holes and broken plaster, its windows partially replaced by heavy plastic sheeting, he showed no sign that he would ever yield or move his capital to the safety of nearby Tuzla. That evening, Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic and I walked alone through the frozen streets of Sarajevo as he told me of his youth in a multiethnic city where, he said, he did not even know the religion or ethnic background of his friends. "That city I knew and loved is dying because the West has not stopped this war," he said bitterly.

In March 1995, Tudjman insisted that the Serbs give up control of the Krajina, the border sections of Croatia seized in 1991 and now "administered" by the United Nations—an international presence that had become a cover for continued Serb ethnic cleansing of a once-mixed Croat-Serb region. If the Krajina region was not returned to him peacefully, Tudjman warned, he would attack it soon, no matter what the risks. This was precisely what Croatian Foreign Minister Granic had warned me about in December 1992, during my first private trip.

American and British intelligence had long predicted that if the Croatians attacked in the Krajina, the Serbs would defeat them. Secretary of Defense Perry and General Shalikashvili gave this assessment directly to the Croatian Defense Minister, Gojko Susak, in a meeting I attended in Munich on February 4, 1995, telling him that the Serbs would defeat any Croatian attack, either with their own local resources or with support from the regular Yugoslav Army under Milosevic's control. Later, after the success of his own forces, Susak enjoyed teasing me about the Munich meeting.\*

In March 1995, I flew to Zagreb to try to persuade Tudjman not to launch the attack. Tudjman not only agreed not to attack the Krajina Serbs, but said he would announce it publicly if he could meet with Vice President Gore the following week, when both men would be in Copenhagen for an international conference. A week later, on March 12, Tudjman and Vice President Gore met

\* From my notes of the meeting in Munich with Susak: "A grim meeting. Perry told Susak that we continue to feel that his government was making a mistake. Perry suggested that his country was sliding toward war and it might not turn out well for them. General Shali warned him that the JCS assessment of the balance of forces was far more pessimistic than Zagreb's. My own instinct is that the Croatian gamble might pay off, although the risks are high."

in the chaotic atmosphere of a huge conference hall in Copenhagen. Logistics were a nightmare; at one point, as we moved from meeting to meeting, the Vice President almost bumped into Fidel Castro, whom he was trying to avoid. Gore told Tudjman that the United States strongly opposed the use of force to settle the problems in the Krajina, and Tudjman pledged that he would not attack—provided the region was returned to him peacefully. The Gore-Tudjman announcement was widely hailed as a step away from the abyss, and for the time being, war was averted. But in the end, the Croatian assault in the Krajina was only delayed, not prevented, and the American intelligence judgment as to what would happen if the Croats attacked proved—fortunately—to be profoundly wrong.

**The Frasure Mission.** By March the “Carter cease-fire” had begun to crumble, each side blaming the other. Frasure was by now in the midst of intense negotiations with Milosevic, enthusiastically supported by the Europeans. Several times he came close to a compromise that would suspend the U.N. economic sanctions in return for a partial recognition of Bosnia. But each time Bob returned home empty-handed. Finally, in late May, Frasure recommended that we back off and allow the new European Union negotiator, former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, who had just replaced David Owen, to take the lead for a month or two, after which we would reassess the situation. No one imagined that this short period in which the new European negotiator took the lead would coincide with some of the most disastrous events of the war.

**A Personal Interlude.** This may not have seemed the best time to get married, but on Sunday, May 27, that is exactly what I did, marrying Kati Marton, an American writer and journalist, in her native Budapest. It was a wonderful wedding, beautifully arranged and hosted by Ambassador Donald Blinken and his Budapest-born wife, Vera. We held the ceremony and reception in the garden of the Ambassador’s residence, a building that during the Cold War had symbolized America and freedom to Kati and her parents, brave journalists who escaped from Hungary in 1957, after having been jailed by the communists before the Revolution of 1956.

Our wedding preparations were shadowed by the drama in Bosnia. Two days before the ceremony, NATO bombed Bosnian Serb positions in retaliation for the increasingly blatant Serb shelling of Sarajevo and the other “U.N. Safe Areas,” which were anything but safe. The air attacks were slightly heavier than the previous “pinpricks,” but not by any standards serious or sustained. In response, the Bosnian Serbs raised the stakes dramatically: they seized more than 350 U.N. peacekeepers and, calling them “human shields”

against further attacks, handcuffed them to trees and telephone poles. The world's press was invited to film these men standing miserably in the broiling sun. Images of French soldiers waving white flags of surrender were broadcast around the world, to the horror of the new French President, Jacques Chirac.

The television pictures were appalling. That the world's greatest powers would be brought to their knees by such thugs seemed to me inconceivable. As Kati and I prepared for the wedding, I kept in close touch with Washington. A high-level White House meeting was scheduled for early afternoon on May 27; I realized with a start that it would be taking place at exactly the same time as our wedding.

A few hours before the ceremony I made one final call from Budapest to Washington, and was connected by the Operations Center to Madeleine Albright, John Kornblum, and Tom Donilon, Christopher's chief of staff, who were preparing for the White House meeting. Giving advice to Europeans, whose personnel were at great risk, was difficult for the United States, which had no troops in the field. The nations with peacekeepers in exposed areas, including the British, the French, and the Dutch, feared that any retaliation against the Bosnian Serbs would result in the murder of hostages and other peacekeepers, and sought to negotiate their release, an approach I feared would weaken the U.N. and strengthen the Serbs. I argued that NATO should threaten new air strikes if the hostages were not released. I closed the conversation with my colleagues by asking that my views be presented at the meeting. "I recommend," I said, "that we give the Serbs forty-eight hours to release all the hostages unharmed, and tell them that if they don't, we will bomb Pale. And then do so if necessary. I recognize that the Europeans will oppose this because they fear reprisals, but not one U.N. soldier has been executed, and the Serbs cannot be permitted to defy the entire world community any longer. I am convinced that they will cave if the threat is credible." The silence on the other end of the line suggested that my colleagues in Washington thought that, with the wedding only a few minutes away, I had lost my mind. "I'm serious," I said, "but now I have to get married."

During our honeymoon, as Kati and I tried unsuccessfully to ignore the Balkans, the Bosnian Serbs released the peacekeepers unharmed. But there was substantial, if circumstantial, evidence of secret deals between the U.N. and the Bosnian Serbs. The release of the hostages came in stages after a secret meeting on June 4 at Zvornik between the top U.N. commander, French general Bernard Janvier, and the Bosnian Serb commander, General Ratko Mladic. It was not clear what assurances, if any, the Serbs got from the U.N. commanders, but a suspicion spread rapidly that the Serbs and the local U.N. commanders had made a deal never to use NATO airpower in Bosnia again.

While Milosevic and the Pale Serbs said publicly that they had received such assurances, French and U.N. officials denied it. To this day, Washington has never been sure of what actually was agreed to, but after the hostages were released, the intensity of the Bosnian Serb military effort increased dramatically, with no further U.N. or NATO air strikes.

The senior U.N. official in the former Yugoslavia, Yasushi Akashi, who had originally approved the air strikes, told his staff that the events of May had "finally shown" their "ineffectiveness." This was a repudiation of the British commander in Sarajevo, General Rupert Smith, who had tried to put a more muscular policy into effect. U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali removed from General Smith the authority to ask NATO for air strikes and said he would personally make all future decisions on an individual basis from New York, thus further reducing the chances of more air strikes.

A debate now broke out within the Western alliance over whether or not to stay in Bosnia. Some governments with troops in Bosnia, including Canada and Great Britain, began talking openly of withdrawing. On June 2, an American pilot, Captain Scott O'Grady, was shot down flying an F-16 over Bosnia. He survived, escaping a week later to become, briefly, an American hero.

While Prime Minister John Major supported the continuation of the British presence, a majority of his Cabinet favored withdrawal before the beginning of another harsh Balkan winter. In France, President Chirac took a more assertive position. His much older predecessor, François Mitterrand, had shown the pro-Serb sentiments of many Frenchmen of his generation, steeped in the history of Serb resistance to Germany in two world wars. Chirac was different, in both style and substance; he felt that the situation in Bosnia had reached a dead end, and that the Western powers either had to strengthen their forces and punish the Bosnian Serbs, or else withdraw. Under prodding from Chirac, the British, French, and Dutch announced on June 3 the creation of a new Rapid Reaction Force to strengthen the U.N. in Bosnia. But it was not clear, perhaps not even to its creators, whether the Rapid Reaction Force was designed to keep the U.N. in Bosnia or to help it get out quickly. The existing middle ground, Chirac correctly perceived, was indefensible, both politically and militarily. If the British withdrew, the French position would be impossible. To keep the British in Bosnia, Chirac judged that greater American involvement and support were essential. If this did not happen, Chirac would support withdrawal.

Chirac thus put the Administration in a tight bind, but one that was important in forcing us to start dealing with the reality—that one way or another, the United States could no longer stay uninvolved.

**OpPlan 40-104.** As it happened, there was a little-noticed, but critical, exception to American policy against sending troops to Bosnia: President Clin-

ton had pledged that American troops would be used to support a U.N. withdrawal. As the situation in Bosnia deteriorated in the spring of 1995 and many countries began talking openly of withdrawing from the U.N. force, the Pentagon and NATO completed OpPlan 40-104, a highly classified planning document that covered every aspect of NATO's role in supporting a U.N. withdrawal, from bridge building to body bags.

Immediately upon returning from our honeymoon on June 8, I asked the Pentagon for a briefing on 40-104. At first they resisted, claiming the plan was a NATO document, but finally Lieutenant General Howell Estes, the chief Pentagon planner, came to my office and laid out before Kornblum, Frasure, and me a plan that left us stunned. As Estes, who was not its author, told us, it was bold and dangerous—and had already been formally approved by the NATO Council as a planning document, thus significantly reducing Washington's options. It used twenty thousand American troops, some of whom were assigned to carry out a risky nighttime U.S. heliborne extraction of U.N. troops from isolated enclaves, an operation likely to produce casualties. As soon as General Estes finished our briefing, I rushed to Christopher's office and insisted that he and his inner team get the same briefing. When he heard it, Christopher was equally amazed.

General Estes's briefing convinced me that it would no longer be possible to stay out of Bosnia. To assist in the U.N.'s withdrawal, which would be followed by an even greater disaster, made no sense at all. Using American ground troops to fight the war was equally out of the question. Something had to be done or else a Serb victory, and additional ethnic cleansing, were inevitable. It was a terrible set of choices, but there was no way Washington could avoid involvement much longer. I still favored air strikes, but there was fierce opposition to this in most parts of the government and throughout Europe.

When OpPlan 40-104 came to the attention of senior officials, there was some confusion as to its status. Although President Clinton had promised that U.S. troops would support a U.N. withdrawal, he had never formally approved (or been briefed on) OpPlan 40-104. But it had already been endorsed by the NATO Council. According to complicated Cold War procedures that had never been tested, if the NATO Council gave the order to assist the U.N.'s withdrawal, the planning document would become an operational order, adjusted for specific circumstances. Thus if the U.N. withdrew, OpPlan 40-104 would trigger the immediate deployment of twenty thousand American troops in the heart of the Balkans as part of the NATO force. The operation, which would have an American commander, would be impossible without the participation of Americans.

The President would still have to make the final decision to deploy U.S. troops, but his options had been drastically narrowed. If, in the event of a U.N.

withdrawal, he did not deploy American troops, the United States would be flouting, in its first test, the very NATO process it had created. The resulting recriminations could mean the end of NATO as an effective military alliance, as the British and French had already said to us privately. It was not an overstatement to say that America's post-World War II security role in Europe was at stake. Clearly, we had to find a policy that avoided a disastrous U.N. withdrawal. This meant a greater U.S. involvement.

**M. Chirac Comes to Town.** Jacques Chirac arrived in Washington on June 14 for his first presidential visit, demanding American action in Bosnia. It was not for nothing that he had acquired the nickname "Le Bulldozer." He was direct, intuitive, and blunt where his predecessor, François Mitterrand, had been opaque, intellectual, and elegant. The trip was supposed to be one in a series of semi-annual U.S.-E.U. summits, and Chirac was accompanied by Jacques Santer, the new President of the European Union. But it quickly turned into a Bosnia crisis session and the rest of the agenda—including economic, trade, law enforcement, and environmental issues—was swept away.

The day began with the "pre-brief," a normally routine session to prepare the President, but it quickly degenerated into an angry and contentious discussion of Bosnia. The presentation given by members of the National Security Council staff was, in my view, misleading as to the situation, and especially the degree of American "automaticity" in assisting a U.N. withdrawal. When I started to offer a contrary view, the President, obviously disturbed that he was receiving contradictory information before an important visit, cut me off sharply. Then, as various people offered differing views, Christopher and I had to excuse ourselves in order to go to the French Embassy, where Chirac was expecting us for lunch. In the car, I expressed my astonishment at what had just happened. Christopher, much sobered by the meeting, agreed that we had to talk to the President again as soon as possible.

The rest of the day was chaotic. The President met alone with Chirac for well over an hour instead of the scheduled twenty minutes, while Vice President Gore, Christopher, and half the American Cabinet milled around in the Cabinet Room, chatting with our perplexed European Union visitors. Clinton then sent Chirac on an impromptu trip to Capitol Hill to see Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and Speaker Newt Gingrich, hoping that he would be able to persuade the Republican leaders to give the Administration greater support on Bosnia. Chirac's meetings, while cordial, changed nothing. Then he returned to the White House for a small dinner, which we spent, for the most part, in conversation about subjects other than Bosnia.

After Chirac left, I stood in the main entrance hall, in front of the North Portico, with Christopher, Berger, and Albright. The President and First Lady danced alone to the music of a Marine Band ensemble, which had played dur-