

# The Siege of Sarajevo Ends

(September 9–14)

In one of his many public statements, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Montenegrin Radovan Karadzic, said that the Serbs in the past period, when everyone was on their side, had been subjected to “genocidal extermination,” whereas now, over the last year, when so many are against them, they are suffering the least.

Of all the innumerable absurdities and untruths that have been uttered, this statement truly takes the cake. For more than forty years Bosnia was inhabited by Bosnians, and we did not distinguish between Serbs, Muslim, and Croats, or at least such distinctions were not paramount in their mutual relations. Throughout that period, to the best of the Yugoslav and world public’s knowledge, there were no detention camps for Serbs in Bosnia, no brothels for Serb women, no Serbian children had their throats cut. . . . But according to Karadzic, the Serbs were somehow unhappy then. And now, in the war, with so many dead, . . . now, according to their leader, the time has come when they are suffering the least. . . . Ethnically pure states are an impossibility in today’s world, and it is ridiculous to try to create and maintain such a state, even when there is just one nation.

—MIRA MARKOVIC (Mrs. Slobodan Milosevic),  
in her newspaper column, January 20, 1993<sup>1</sup>

AFTER THIRTEEN DAYS ON THE ROAD—the longest of all our shuttle trips—we planned to spend at least a week in Washington. There were personal reasons for this, but, with major policy issues to be decided, we also needed a few days to develop a consensus on some key issues.

Events in Bosnia, however, were moving too fast for a coherent policy review, and after only one working day in Washington we were on our way back

to the region. This time we would negotiate the end of the three-year siege of Sarajevo—and unexpectedly meet with the world's two most wanted indicted war criminals, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic.

On Sunday, September 10, even as we regrouped in Washington, Janvier met again with Mladic in the border town of Mali Zvornik. The meeting had been arranged by Presidents Chirac and Milosevic, both of whom wanted another bombing pause as soon as possible. Chirac was anxious for the release of the two French pilots who had been captured during the bombing. Janvier went to the meeting expecting Mladic to offer the withdrawal of Bosnian Serb heavy weapons from the hills around Sarajevo. But once again the meeting did not go according to the U.N. plan. Instead, Mladic threatened to attack the remaining "safe areas," and refused to negotiate until after the bombing had ended.

Mladic's behavior opened the door for two of the most unexpected and important tactical decisions of the NATO air campaign—to attack vital military targets near the largest Serb city in Bosnia, Banja Luka; and to use Tomahawk cruise missiles. Thirteen of these expensive radar-guided missiles were launched against important Bosnian Serb military centers in western Bosnia, far from Sarajevo and Gorazde. Although a few seven-hundred-pound warheads were hardly as powerful as the hundreds of two-thousand-pound bombs that were being dropped by planes, the psychological effect of such sophisticated weapons, previously used only in the Gulf War, was enormous. The damage, however, was more than psychological: one of the missiles knocked out the main communications center for the Bosnian Serb Army in the west, with devastating consequences.

Karadzic seemed increasingly desperate. In a letter addressed to Presidents Clinton, Yeltsin, and Chirac, he combined pleading, outrage, and threats, calling the attacks against Banja Luka "bizarre" and "barbaric." If they continued, he said, the Bosnian Serbs would "reconsider participation in further peace talks." NATO, he went on, "has declared war against the Republic of Srpska. . . . Time is rapidly running out."

Although Karadzic's letter seemed to me to confirm the effectiveness of the Tomahawks, the strikes added to the tension within NATO. On September 11, at a special meeting of the NATO Council, France, Spain, Canada, and Greece criticized the attacks in western Bosnia, claiming that they represented an unauthorized escalation.

There was also a wintry blast from Moscow. Even before the Tomahawks, Yeltsin had written President Clinton on September 7 to express concern about the bombing. Now, the use of cruise missiles, the quintessential Cold War weapon, rattled the Russians deeply. They could not, they announced angrily, "be indifferent to the fate of the children of our fellow-Slavs." (The Pen-

tagon immediately denied that any children had been killed in the air strikes.) Russian diplomats threatened to withdraw from the Contact Group. Defense Minister Pavel Grachev called Bill Perry to warn that the strikes could lead Moscow to reconsider its military cooperation agreements with NATO, and even threatened "to help the Serbs in a unilateral way" if the bombing continued. The next day, Russia proposed a U.N. Security Council resolution to condemn the bombing, but Ambassador Albright swiftly headed it off.

This strong Russian reaction to the bombing could not be entirely ignored. Perry and Grachev had already begun discussions about Russian participation in a post-peace agreement force in Bosnia. Beyond the Balkans lay the larger issue of Russia's relations with NATO, a volatile issue ever since President Clinton had announced our intention to enlarge the Atlantic Alliance. With tensions mounting, the President and Christopher sent Strobe Talbott to Moscow immediately for "quiet consultations." His trip proved timely and effective. After his forceful explanation that the bombing was consistent with NATO's authority and essential to the negotiations, the Russian concerns, while not eliminated, abated considerably—thus clearing the path for the continuation of the Perry-Grachev negotiations.

As the bombing continued, Croat and Bosnian Muslim military forces enjoyed their best week since the war began, even though there was still no military coordination between them. In the week after Geneva, the Croats took the town of Donji Vakuf, thus opening up a large area in western Bosnia. Karadzic charged that the NATO air strikes had assisted the offensive. But while the air strikes had undeniably aided the Federation, there was no truth to Karadzic's charge; in fact, such coordination was the ultimate nightmare of many NATO officers, the "slippery slope" toward the deep military involvement they feared and opposed. The truth remained as simple as it was ironic: the air strikes would never have occurred if Pale had not made a historic misreading of President Clinton and the United States.

We were approaching circuit overload when the Principals' Committee met at the White House on the afternoon of September 11. The President attended part of the meeting, and his presence made a huge difference, giving our discussion focus and enabling us to reach some important conclusions quickly.

Tony Lake wanted us to convene an international peace conference right away. Others began to support him, but I resisted; we needed to allow the Federation offensive to continue, and the gap among the three sides was still too great for face-to-face meetings of the three presidents. Our next diplomatic goal, I said, had to be to fix "the major flaw in the Geneva principles"—the lack of "connective tissue between the two entities."

"Has the NATO bombing reached the point of diminishing returns?" the President asked.

The question was an indication of the heavy pressure the President was under to end the bombing. "No, Mr. President," I replied. "There may come a time when continued bombing would hurt the peace efforts, but we're not there yet. The negotiating team believes we should tough it out. Our leadership position is getting stronger. We should use it or we will lose it. It is hurting the Bosnian Serbs, and helping us. As for Milosevic, he is not making a big point of it."

Christopher agreed. "The bombing should continue," he said. "It would be a mistake to back off now."

"Okay," the President said. "But I am frustrated that the air campaign is not better coordinated with the diplomatic effort."

This was an astute observation. The same point troubled me deeply; there was no mechanism or structure within the Administration capable of such coordination. It was, in fact, the role of the NSC to coordinate such interagency issues. I wanted to tell the President that this problem required immediate attention. But relations among the NSC, State, and Defense were not something an Assistant Secretary of State could fix. In fact, we later learned that Admiral Smith had ordered Lieutenant General Ryan, who was in charge of the bombing, to have no contact with the negotiating team.

Unexpectedly, Bill Perry suggested we consider another unilateral bombing pause. This caught Warren Christopher and me slightly off guard. Why would the Secretary of Defense propose a bombing halt just when his forces were dramatically expanding the scope of the bombing? To people not familiar with the ways of the Pentagon it may have appeared inexplicable. But the huge military establishment often operates at several different levels at once. Correctly understood, the Pentagon's behavior was less surprising. The military did not like putting its pilots at risk in pursuit of a limited political objective, hence their desire to end the bombing as soon as possible. At the same time, if asked to continue the bombing, they would seek to make it as effective as possible. Thus their desire to use Tomahawk missiles and F-117s, the airplane least detectable by radar. In addition, the Navy and the Air Force both wanted to publicize, especially to Congress, the value of their new weaponry. For the Navy, this meant the Tomahawks, which were launched from naval vessels in the Adriatic. For the Air Force, it meant the expensive and controversial F-117, whose value had been questioned by some Pentagon critics.

Warren Christopher objected first. Because he was normally so soft-spoken, Christopher was especially effective when he raised his voice or showed emotion. "We must carry on the bombing until it has achieved real effectiveness," he said firmly. "The Serbs must be impressed with our willingness to bomb on a continuous basis if necessary." Christopher was supported by Lake, Albright, and myself.

Almost immediately a more serious problem arose. Admiral Owens, the Vice Chairman of the JCS, made a remark that surprised Christopher and me. In his calm, methodical, and authoritative style, Owens said NATO would run out of new authorized "Option Two" targets within two or three days. Of course, Owens said, the bombing could be continued by hitting old Option One and Two targets again. However, this would have diminishing value, and put the pilots at continually greater risk as the Bosnian Serb anti-aircraft gunners became more proficient. To attack Option Three targets, a much broader group that included Serb troop concentrations and equipment throughout Bosnia, we would need to return to both the NATO Council and the U.N. Security Council for permission. But everyone in the room knew that the chances of getting approval from our NATO allies to attack Option Three targets was close to zero.

On the drive back to the State Department after the meeting, Christopher told me that he doubted that the military had really exhausted all its authorized Option Two targets. But there was no way to question the military within its own area of responsibility—the military controlled the information and independent verification was virtually impossible.

Only moments earlier the President had observed that the bombing should be calibrated for political and diplomatic purposes, but in fact the opposite was suddenly the case; the military had rewritten our negotiating timetable. My immediate concern was that if the information became public, as so often happened after White House meetings, it would weaken our negotiating hand. If the air campaign was really going to end within a few days, we had to continue the bombing long enough to negotiate something in return. "If NATO runs out of targets before we resume our talks with Belgrade, we won't have a chance to get anything in return for the bombing," I said. "Let's not stop it for free." Christopher agreed. "Let's be sure the negotiating team has the benefit of the leverage of military force for as long as possible," he said.

Confronting this new time pressure, Christopher asked that the negotiating team leave for Belgrade the next day, four days ahead of schedule.

Before leaving the next day, I called Admiral Smith in Naples to ask how much longer he would be willing to continue the bombing. Smith replied that, assuming routine weather, he thought he had about three more days of new targets, after which he could keep the bombing going only by returning to targets that had already been hit—or, as Smith put it in his best salty old sea dog style, "cleaning up a few stray cats and dogs." The meaning behind the message was clear: Smith did not wish to let the bombing be "used" by the negotiators, and would decide when to stop based on his own judgment. This was hardly the best way to integrate diplomacy and military pressure, but we had no choice in the matter.

We slept little as we flew to Belgrade on the night of September 12–13. As we prepared for the meetings, I raised a sensitive issue: What should we do if asked to meet the two indicted war criminals who led the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic? Should we meet with them at all, and, if so, how should we deal with them? It was one of those rare questions that combined political and tactical considerations with questions of morality.

There was a history here. Karadzic and Mladic had met in the past with Western negotiators, including Vance, Owen, and Lord Carrington. Jimmy Carter had spent a great deal of time with Karadzic only seven months earlier, and remained in regular contact with him by phone and fax.

Nonetheless, I felt deeply uncomfortable about the prospect of sitting down with indicted war criminals. But in the end I decided it was justifiable under these circumstances. In reaching this conclusion, I was deeply influenced by the stories of Raoul Wallenberg and Folke Bernadotte, two legendary Swedes—both the subject of biographies by my wife, Kati—who had negotiated, respectively, with Adolf Eichmann and Heinrich Himmler in 1944–1945. Each man had decided to deal with a mass murderer in order to save lives. History had shown the correctness of their decisions, which had resulted in the rescue of tens of thousands of Jews before the two men themselves were killed—Wallenberg in a Soviet prison, Bernadotte at the hands of Israeli terrorists in Jerusalem in 1948.

We concluded that it was similarly acceptable to meet with Karadzic and Mladic if it would help the negotiations. As our plane descended toward the military airport in Belgrade, we decided we would not ask to meet the two men, but would see them if Milosevic suggested it. However, we would set certain conditions. We would not meet with any Bosnian Serbs—indicted or unindicted—if they presented themselves as a separate delegation or tried to negotiate on their own. At the same time, I said each member of the team could decide whether to participate if either man showed up, and whether to shake hands with them.

We landed in Belgrade in the late morning on September 13. Two hours later we were back at Milosevic's villa outside Belgrade. He was anxious to get started. An ABC television crew, led by correspondent Sheila McVicker, filmed the opening moments of our meeting for a *Nightline* special they were producing, and then retreated to the garden. As soon as they left, Milosevic complained about the expanded bombing. "Your planes are giving close air support to the Muslims and Croats," he said. I told him that he was misinformed on this point, but I readily agreed—in fact, with a certain pleasure—that the bombing, even though it was not coordinated with Federation ground

troops, had the effect of helping the Muslims and Croats. "The Serbs brought it down upon themselves," I said.

Milosevic said the situation on the ground needed "calming." He thought he could get the Bosnian Serbs to agree to a cease-fire throughout the country in return for a cessation of the bombing. Then, he said, we should convene an international conference as quickly as possible to end the war.

Milosevic's proposal for a nationwide cease-fire was new. I knew this was what Washington wanted, but it was premature as long as the offensive was progressing. "A general cease-fire is out of the question at this point," I said. "But we can talk about one for the Sarajevo area."

We were struck by the change in his tone. Clearly, the Croat-Muslim offensive in the west and the bombing were having a major effect on the Bosnian Serbs. Milosevic seemed in a rush. Unfortunately, so were many people in the West. Not for the first time, I thought: the chances for a viable peace will improve if the bombing and the offensive continue, at least for a while.

At about 5:00 P.M., Milosevic unveiled his big surprise. "Karadzic and Mladic are in another villa, about two hundred meters away," he said. "They can be here in ten minutes. Why don't we ask them to join us so you can negotiate directly with them?"

I was grateful we had prepared ourselves for this moment. At that instant, however, I felt a jolt go through my body. It is not an exaggeration to say that I simply hated the two men for what they had done—including, indirectly, causing the deaths of our three colleagues.

"Let's talk awhile first," I said, trying not to appear anxious. "Are you sure that we can accomplish anything? Why don't you see them first while we wait here?"

Milosevic said he was sure we could make progress if we used his "technology"—by which he meant the theatrical style with which he loved to dazzle and outmaneuver other politicians in the Balkans.

"Mr. President, in that case, we are ready to meet with them, but with two conditions. First, they must be part of your delegation, you must lead the discussions, and you must control them. Second, they must not give us a lot of historical bullshit, as they have with everyone else. They must be ready for serious discussions."

"They will agree," Milosevic said. "No bullshit. Let me get them." He told an aide to send for the Bosnian Serbs. We asked the ABC crew waiting outside to leave, without telling them why. Then we had drinks on the patio and waited for the men from Pale. The lawns blended into trees not far away. In the early August evening there was still plenty of natural light.

After about twenty minutes a couple of Mercedes sedans pulled up in the driveway. Two men stepped out of the first car, trailed by others. As they ap-

proached us through the trees in the fading summer light, their unmistakable silhouettes jolted me again: one, in a suit, tall with a wild shock of hair; the other, short and burly, in combat fatigues, walking as though through a muddy field.

Before the Bosnian Serbs could reach us, I turned to Milosevic and said, "We'll take a walk while you explain the ground rules. We'll return when you can assure us they have agreed." We retreated into the woods about one hundred yards behind the main house, where we waited nervously and reviewed our strategy. Ten minutes later an aide came running up to us and said Milosevic and his guests were ready.

I did not shake hands, although both Karadzic and Mladic tried to. Some of our team did, others did not; it was their choice. We sat down at a long table on the patio facing each other, and began to talk. Arrayed next to Karadzic were other Bosnian Serbs whose names were familiar to us, including Momcilo Krajisnik, the Speaker of the Bosnian Serb Assembly. Karadzic, speaking partly in English, began complaining immediately about how unfair the bombing was. He said he was ready for a nationwide cessation of hostilities, but only if the Federation agreed not to "take advantage of it." I said the United States supported a general cease-fire in principle, but not at this time. We were here only to discuss the situation around Sarajevo.

As Karadzic replied, I looked at Mladic. Hollywood could not have found a more convincing war villain. He glowered—there was no better word for it—and engaged each of the Americans in what seemed to us, when we compared notes later, as staring contests. Nonetheless, he had a compelling presence; it was not hard to understand why his troops revered him; he was, I thought, one of those lethal combinations that history thrusts up occasionally—a charismatic murderer.

Despite his size, Karadzic was not an imposing figure at this meeting. He had a sad face, with heavy jowls, a soft chin, and surprisingly gentle eyes. He had studied psychiatry in New York and understood English well. He was quick to launch into a self-pitying diatribe against NATO and the Muslims, whom he accused of mortaring their own marketplace on August 28 in order to lure NATO into the war. He referred several times to the "humiliation the Serbs are suffering."

After a few minutes of Karadzic's harangue, I turned to Milosevic. "Mr. President," I said, "you assured us that this would not happen. If it continues, we are prepared to leave immediately." Karadzic responded emotionally. "If we can't get anything done here, I will call President Carter," he said. "I am in regular contact with him." We already knew, of course, that Karadzic had invited the former President to get involved again. Karadzic started to rise, as if to make a telephone call.

For the only time in the evening, I spoke directly to him. "Let me tell you something," I said, my voice rising. "President Carter appointed me as Assistant Secretary of State. I worked for him for four years. Like most Americans, I have great admiration for him. But he is now a private citizen. We work only for President Clinton. We take orders only from President Clinton. That is all there is to it."

Karadzic sat down abruptly, and Milosevic said something to him in Serbian. For the rest of the meeting, Karadzic was on his best behavior. As Pardew noted later, Karadzic played the "facilitator who kept the Bosnian Serbs on track"—something we assumed his psychiatric training had prepared him for. He showed no sign of the qualities that had led even a cautious observer like Ambassador Zimmermann to label him the "Himmler of his generation."<sup>2</sup>

Karadzic calmly proposed that the Americans produce a draft agreement. I asked Clark, Owen, Hill, and Pardew to work on a document that would end the siege of Sarajevo. As my colleagues hunched over pads of paper, Milosevic and I walked around the garden and talked about other matters. "You know, that was smart," he said, "what you said about Jimmy Carter. Those guys"—he meant the Bosnian Serbs—"are so cut off from the world they think Carter still determines American policy."

Dusk had fallen by the time my colleagues produced a first draft. Seated on a low brick wall about seventy-five feet away, Milosevic and I watched as General Clark began to read his draft to the Serbs, pausing regularly for translation. We could not make out his exact words, but the deep, booming voice of the Serbian interpreter drifted toward us. The scene was unforgettable: Clark standing under the tall lamp, reading from his draft, the Serbs clustered around, listening intently, the familiar shapes of the two main Serb protagonists outlined in the shadows. Occasionally we could hear other Serb voices getting louder.

As Milosevic and I chatted, Milutinovic ran over to us and said something to Milosevic. "We better join them," Milosevic said. "They're in trouble." Everyone was standing, but Milosevic pulled up a chair and sat down. After a moment's hesitation, I did the same in order to establish some rough equality between us.

Karadzic, clearly angry, said that our draft proposal was unacceptable. Suddenly Mladic erupted. Pushing to the center of the circle, he began a long, emotional diatribe. "The situation is explosive, worse than at any time since the war began," he said. "There is no justification for the bombing. NATO is supporting the regular Croatian Army inside our nation. It's worse than the Nazis. But they cannot destroy the spirit of the Serb people. Neither can the United States. The bombing is a criminal act." Then, a memorable phrase: "No one can be allowed to give away a meter of our sacred Serb soil."

This was the intimidating style he had used with the Dutch commander at Srebrenica, with Janvier, and with so many others. He gave off the scent of danger. It was not hard to see how frightening this man might be, especially on his own home ground. I did not know if his rage was real or feigned, but this was the genuine Mladic, the one who could unleash a murderous rampage.

Turning my back on Mladic and Karadzic, I rose from my chair and looked down at Milosevic. "Mr. President," I said, "we had an agreement. This behavior is clearly not consistent with it. If your 'friends'"—I said the word with as much sarcasm as I could—"do not wish to have a serious discussion, we will leave now."

Milosevic paused for a moment, perhaps to gauge if this was a bluff. Perhaps he sensed that it wasn't. NATO planes were bombing Bosnian Serb territory as we spoke. It was our moment of maximum leverage, and I was not bluffing about leaving, although we were acutely conscious of the fact that we might lose our best negotiating chip, the bombing, within two or three days.

Milosevic spoke sharply in Serbian to his colleagues, and they began to argue. Motioning my colleagues to follow, I walked to the other end of the patio, where we waited, listening to the sounds of an increasingly angry debate under the lamps.

It was over in a few minutes. Milosevic came over to us, asked us to rejoin him, and said that the Bosnian Serbs were ready to negotiate on the basis of our draft.

Our draft began with a Bosnian Serb commitment to "cease all offensive operations" in the Sarajevo area and remove all heavy weapons from the same area within a week. They also had to open two land routes out of Sarajevo, one the Kiseljak road, to unimpeded humanitarian road traffic. The Sarajevo airport had to reopen within twenty-four hours. In return, NATO would stand down its bombing for seventy-two hours, but resume the bombing if there was no compliance.

I left most of the negotiating to my colleagues, intervening only when necessary to break an impasse. I did not wish to diminish my role by spending too much time with Karadzic and Mladic, and I trusted my colleagues completely. I called Christopher and Tarnoff to describe the remarkable scene unfolding at the villa, and wandered around with Milosevic, talking about next steps in the peace process. Food was set out on a table on the patio, and Milosevic invited me to eat dinner with him and Mladic. I sat with the two men briefly, but left without eating, returning only after Mladic had left. Commenting on this later, Milosevic said I had insulted Mladic by not shaking his hand or eating with him, and this would not make the negotiations any easier. "If that is true, so be

it," I replied, and repeated an earlier theme of our meetings: "We expect you to make this process work."

The Bosnian Serbs argued over almost every word, but sometime after midnight we had what we wanted: after four years, the siege of Sarajevo would be lifted. There was still one important procedural matter to resolve. The Serbs insisted I sign or witness the document. I refused, explaining that we had no formal authority to reach any agreement concerning the activities of NATO or the U.N. We wanted a document with only Serb signatures—and Milosevic and Milutinovic as its witnesses. This was something of a diplomatic innovation—a document drafted by us but signed only by the Serbs as a unilateral undertaking. None of us was aware of diplomatic precedent for it, but it fit our needs perfectly. After it was signed and witnessed, I explained, we would deliver it to Janvier with a "recommendation" that NATO and the U.N. suspend the bombing. The Bosnian Serbs protested vigorously, but they had no choice, and after another long debate, they agreed to the format we had proposed.

At 2:15 on the morning of September 14, after more than ten hours of negotiations, the Serbs signed the document we had written. We watched as one by one they affixed their signatures to the paper—first Karadzic, who signed without hesitating; then the "Vice President of Republika Srpska," Nikola Koljevic, followed by Krajisnik. Mladic signed last. He had long since stopped participating in the negotiations, and sat slumped on a couch on the far side of the room away from his colleagues. One of Milosevic's aides carried the agreement to him. He reached out for the pen, scrawled his name on it without looking at it, and sank back into the sofa. He looked utterly spent.

Finally, Milosevic and his Foreign Minister signed the document as witnesses. We got up to leave, carrying the precious original with us. If it held, the long siege of Sarajevo would be over. Karadzic came over to me and grabbed my hand. "We are ready for peace," he said in English. "Why did you bomb us?"

"I think you know," I said.

I was beginning to get a sense of the Pale Serbs: headstrong, given to empty theatrical statements, but in the end, essentially bullies when their bluff was called. The Western mistake over the previous four years had been to treat the Serbs as rational people with whom one could argue, negotiate, compromise, and agree. In fact, they respected only force or an unambiguous and credible threat to use it.