

# The Western Offensive

(September 14-20)

It's farewell to the drawing-room's civilised cry,  
The professor's sensible whereto and why,  
The frock-coated diplomat's social aplomb,  
Now matters are settled with gas and with bomb.

—W. H. AUDEN, "Danse Macabre"

WE BELIEVED WE HAD MADE THE BEST possible deal in Belgrade, though I still wonder what might have been accomplished had we been able to continue the bombing for another two weeks. There were few second thoughts in Washington, however, where the reaction was astonishing. Buoyed by enthusiastic expressions of support during a long night of telephone conversations with Washington, we left Belgrade for Zagreb just after dawn on September 14 to deliver the Serb agreement to General Janvier. The United Nations command were sticklers for proper procedures, and we did not have formal authority to conduct a negotiation on their behalf. To minimize the U.N.'s sense of injured pride, we told Janvier that we were simply transmitting a "unilateral undertaking" by the Bosnian Serbs concerning Sarajevo, along with a recommendation that the U.N. suspend the bombing. But we asked him to wait until after we had talked to Izetbegovic, whom we planned to meet in Mostar that afternoon.

Janvier, whose own negotiations with Mladic had been a well-publicized disaster, seemed stunned by our success. But he recovered gracefully, thanked us, and said he would request a twelve-hour bombing "pause" and await the outcome of our talks with Izetbegovic. In military terminology a pause is different from a suspension—it is a brief period when planes are not flying, while the operational orders for the bombing are still in place.

From U.N. headquarters, we raced across town to brief Tudjman, who showed no interest in the Sarajevo agreement. He was focused entirely on the military offensive in western Bosnia. The Bosnian Serb Army was in disarray,

and there were reports that some Serb soldiers had shot their own officers. At least one hundred thousand Serb refugees were pouring into Banja Luka or heading further east to escape the Federation advance.

**Anger in Mostar.** Bracing ourselves for a difficult encounter with Izetbegovic, we flew to Split and drove for three hours through the mountains to the medieval city of Mostar to meet Izetbegovic. We knew the Bosnians would be unhappy; from their point of view, stopping the bombing after only a few weeks in return for ending a four-year siege was a poor bargain.

One of my most vivid memories from my trip to Yugoslavia in 1960 was the beautiful sixteenth-century bridge linking the two parts of Mostar. It was perhaps Yugoslavia's most famous symbol of multiethnic harmony. When I last saw the high-arched bridge in 1992, it was crumbling under continuous shelling by the Croats, pathetically protected by automobile tires hung over its sides on ropes. Two years later, in September of 1994, when I visited Mostar with General Charles Boyd, the Deputy Commander in Chief of U.S. Forces in Europe, the bridge was gone, replaced by a narrow, swaying metal footbridge hundreds of feet above the Neretva River, which Boyd and I cautiously crossed, stepping over gaping holes in the steel planking.

When our negotiating team arrived on the afternoon of September 14, the fighting between the Croats and the Muslims in Mostar had been over for more than a year, as a result of intense efforts by Warren Christopher and U.S. negotiator Charles Redman. Their creation, the Federation, existed—but only on paper. As Silajdzic put it, the Federation was “a house with only a roof, a roof full of holes.” The damage from that Croat-Muslim war was still palpable in Mostar, where the multiethnic city had become a cauldron of hate.

With Croat and Bosnian forces advancing against the Serbs in western Bosnia, there should have been a marked improvement in the situation in Mostar, far to the south. But there wasn't. Along the line dividing the two halves of Mostar, there were only rubble and tension. The hostility of the people was evident from their stares and gestures. The Croat portion of the city was held by organized gangsters. Each part of the city was patrolled by heavily armed men in police and paramilitary uniforms. When we had toured the “confrontation line” in 1994, Boyd and I had walked between armed Croats and Muslims men only ten or fifteen feet apart who drank and talked to one another, joked, and even played cards—but with the safeties off their weapons. It was one of the saddest and most tense walks of my life.

Now, a year later, little had changed. As our heavily armed convoy weaved through the streets, around wrecked vehicles and barricades, to reach the Muslim sector, where our meeting would be held, I was again appalled by the senselessness of the war.

The meeting with Izetbegovic was even worse than we expected. Christopher had called Izetbegovic earlier in the day, urging him to support the agreement, but the Bosnian President told the Secretary he wanted to withhold judgment until he saw us in Mostar. He showed no appreciation that the long siege of his capital city was over. He would prefer to let the people of Sarajevo live under Serb guns for a while longer if it also meant that the NATO bombing would continue.

Haris Silajdzic showed even greater fury. For the first time I saw in the normally urbane Prime Minister a tendency to explode that would re-emerge, sometimes disastrously, at tense moments in the negotiations. Calling the cease-fire "totally unacceptable," Silajdzic demanded that the bombing continue. As Silajdzic continued to complain vigorously, Izetbegovic signaled me to leave the room with him. Once alone, he told me he understood why the United States had taken its position, and would reluctantly support us. But, he said, he could not publicly endorse a bombing suspension yet. (There was a large press corps assembled outside our meeting place.) First, he would have to return to Sarajevo and, as he put it, "work with my people." He would have to show them that he had forced us to produce something "better" than the present agreement. In other words, he wanted us to return to Belgrade and "strengthen" the agreement.

I said that I sympathized with his dilemma. I told him, in confidence, that the bombing would have ended within days anyway and that his choices, like mine, were therefore limited. We returned to the larger meeting, where Silajdzic demanded several changes in the agreement. I agreed to negotiate all of these with Milosevic as soon as I returned to Belgrade, after a Contact Group meeting scheduled for the next day in Geneva. We parted amid confusion, in a mud-filled alley surrounded by journalists using long "boom" microphones to try to pick up our farewell comments. True to their promise, the Bosnians were reserved in their public comments, but they did not go so far as to attack the agreement.

**Geneva.** The next morning, I asked Bob Owen and Chris Hill to drive to Sarajevo with Silajdzic to reassure him and begin discussion of a postwar constitution. For both Americans it was their first trip over Mount Igman, and when they reached the scene of the accident, they got out for a moment to pay tribute to their fallen comrades and, as Hill told me later, take a look at that "godforsaken and worthless place."

The rest of us flew to Geneva for another round of Contact Group ritual. With the pace of negotiations so intense, I wanted to postpone the meeting, but we were locked in because we had agreed to let the Russians host it in lieu of

a meeting in Moscow. The meeting was large and messy, but it received heavy publicity, which was all the Russians cared about. Igor Ivanov, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, chaired the meeting. Usually affable, Ivanov occasionally exploded in anger, but regained his composure quickly. The German Contact Group representative, Wolfgang Ischinger, helped smooth things over.

All four nations pressed us to convene an international peace conference. I replied that the differences between the sides were still too great, but we would get there eventually. Instead, I suggested we invite the three Foreign Ministers to another meeting, similar to the one in Geneva, to be held during the United Nations General Assembly session in New York near the end of September. We needed an agreement on the creation of central governmental institutions—the “connective tissue” between the Serbs and the Federation—that had eluded us at Geneva. If we could achieve that, we could begin to plan “the big one”—a full-fledged peace conference with the three presidents.

**Belgrade.** We flew back to Belgrade on the afternoon of September 16 to convince Milosevic to accept changes in the cease-fire agreement. The bombing had been suspended since 10:00 A.M. on September 14, but we made it clear to Milosevic that it could resume. President Clinton had made a strong and simple public statement, at our request, to underline this threat: “Let me emphasize that if the Bosnian Serbs do not comply with their commitments, the air strikes will resume.”

Milosevic asked General Momcilo Perisic, the Yugoslav Army chief of staff, to join the meeting. Perisic was a sullen chain-smoker who looked like a living Cold War relic. Milosevic said that Mladic was in the hospital for removal of kidney stones. I silently hoped that they would be the kind of medical problem that Chinese and Soviet leaders sometimes discovered in their political opponents, stones from which there is no recovery. Perhaps reading my thoughts, Milosevic offered to let us visit Mladic in the hospital to prove he really was sick. I declined.\*

We presented to Milosevic and Perisic the requirements for continuing the halt in the bombing: first, we wanted the French Rapid Reaction Force to protect the roads into Sarajevo; second, “humanitarian” goods would henceforth mean *all* civilian goods, including cement, glass, shoes, and radios, which the Serbs had previously prevented from reaching the Bosnian capital; third, we

\* We were never sure of the truth about Mladic’s illness, although we did confirm that he had been hospitalized. One theory, widely held around Belgrade, was that Mladic did not want to withdraw the heavy weapons from around Sarajevo, and was sent to the hospital so that he’d be sidelined while the deal was made. In any case, Mladic soon returned to the field to rally his troops.

needed assurance that a drafting error made during the long night of September 12–13 concerning the size of artillery that must be removed would be corrected. This mistake, the result of fatigue by a member of our military support group, had already been reported around the world as a “major concession” by the American negotiators. Finally, we told the Serbs that henceforth the United States and NATO, not the U.N., would decide if they were in compliance.

Throughout this long discussion, I shuttled between the smoke-filled dining room in the villa and an American military field telephone on the patio, through which we had opened a continuous line to Sarajevo and General Rupert Smith, the British commander of all U.N. forces inside Bosnia.\* Milosevic and Perisic argued over some of our demands, but eventually they agreed to all of them. Still, the same issue that had undermined so many previous cease-fires remained: making sure the orders agreed to at one level were carried out at another. The Serbs had become expert at pretending that they could not control their field commanders.

To prevent this, we demanded the name of a Serb field commander in the Sarajevo area with whom General Rupert Smith could negotiate starting the next morning in Sarajevo. Perisic offered the name of General Dragomir Milosevic (no relation to the Serbian President), who, he promised, would appear for discussions in Sarajevo the next morning. From Sarajevo, over a poor telephone connection, Smith told me dryly that he doubted he would ever see the Serb general.

Smith and I spent over an hour speaking on the ancient field telephone that night, and Wes Clark took over whenever I had to return to the villa. The obsolete military telephone system—there were no direct telephone lines between Belgrade and Sarajevo—was difficult to use, and several times the system got so overheated that we had to wait in silence while it cooled down. From Sarajevo, General Smith impatiently questioned our negotiations. I understood why he might mistrust Serb promises—so did we—but, like Janvier, Smith seemed slow to realize that this new situation offered a unique opportunity to break the Serb siege of Sarajevo.

We had been with Milosevic for almost seven hours. As Owen and Hill waited for me to conclude my conversation with General Smith, they tried to talk to Milosevic about constitutional issues. But no matter how hard the polite but persistent Owen tried, Milosevic avoided the subject. Finally, Milutinovic pulled me into a corner of the dining room. “Listen,” he told me, “tell your colleagues that my President will not discuss these issues in front of

\* Smith reported to Janvier, whose command in Zagreb covered all U.N. military activities in the former Yugoslavia, including Bosnia, Croatia, and Macedonia.

General Perisic. Hold off, and he will talk about them later." Such deep distrust among close compatriots was as common as plum brandy in the Balkans.

When Milosevic accepted all of our demands that evening, NATO's bombing was truly over. Although it could have started again if the Serbs challenged the agreement, the threat of resumption kept the Serbs in line. We got our first proof of this the very next day: to General Smith's surprise, General Milosevic appeared on schedule, and the withdrawal of Serb heavy weapons from the Sarajevo area began shortly thereafter.

The following day, to dramatize the end of the siege of Sarajevo, we did something that had not been attempted during the war: we visited all three Balkan capitals and met all three Presidents on a single day. This was more than a stunt; we were entering a new phase of the negotiations, where the ability to visit all three capitals in a single day was essential.

Our first stop on Sunday morning was Zagreb, where the topic was the gathering momentum of the Federation offensive—although, of course, the Federation was never mentioned; as far as the Croats were concerned, this was their operation. Two more important towns had fallen: Bosanski Petrovac and Jajce. The Bosnian Serb communications network in the west remained out of commission, although the Serbs were struggling to repair it.

With many of the roads toward the Serb strongholds lying open before his forces, Tudjman had to decide: should he continue the offensive, and, if so, how far should he go? His government was receiving mixed signals from the United States, and he was confused.

Tudjman's confusion about the American view was understandable. Two days before I returned to Zagreb, Galbraith had presented to Defense Minister Susak a formal message—a *démarche*, in State Department jargon—asking the Croats to halt the military campaign. Galbraith, who did not agree with the *démarche*, had asked for a revision, but his appeal was overruled by Washington, and he unhappily delivered it. At almost the same time, in separate meetings with Croatian Foreign Minister Mate Granic in Washington on September 12, Lake and Christopher recommended that the advance stop as soon as the confrontation lines were "stabilized."

I did not agree, as John Kornblum told Washington. Simply stated, after four years of Serb aggression, the Federation forces were finally gaining territory lost at the beginning of the war. As a matter of both simple justice and high strategy, we should not oppose the offensive unless it either ran into trouble or went too far.

Like so many issues, the policy dispute began with a flawed intelligence assessment. Almost every morning's "daily intelligence report" brought to top Washington officials new warnings of the dangers posed by the offensive. The

"experts" predicted that the more successful the Croatian-Bosnian offensive, the greater the chance that the regular Yugoslav Army would re-enter the war. These opinions were based not on secret intelligence of Yugoslav plans, but on a long-standing belief in the intelligence community about the military superiority of the Serbs and their cohesiveness.

By mid-September, having spent more time with the Serbian leadership than any other Americans, we had come to a different opinion. We concluded that Milosevic had virtually written off the Bosnian Serbs—as he had the Krajina Serbs—and would not intervene militarily to save them. In our opinion, there was only one move that might bring Yugoslav troops back into Bosnia: closing the narrow five-kilometer-long corridor at Brcko, an action that would physically cut off the majority of the Bosnian Serb population from Serbia.

Washington's desire to stop the offensive became public just as we met privately with Tudjman. In a front-page article in *The New York Times* filed from Belgrade—an article which, significantly, quoted Washington officials—Chris Hedges wrote,

United Nations and American officials said they feared that the assault could draw Serbia directly into the war. . . . "All the lights have been red, irrevocably red," the [Washington] official said. "It risks blowing the whole thing out of the water." The message from Washington, this official said, was "quit while you're ahead."

The next day, White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry put the same message on the record. "There's fighting going on in western Bosnia," he said. "We wish they would suspend that fighting and turn their attention to the discussions that Ambassador Holbrooke has been conducting." I would have preferred a different message from the White House, but McCurry, a highly skilled press secretary, would not have made these remarks without guidance from the NSC.

While Washington wanted the offensive to stop, we never had a clear instruction, only the general sense of our senior colleagues, who left to us the exact calibration of the signal. Remembering again how Harriman and Vance had been "overinstructed" during their negotiations with the North Vietnamese in 1968, I was grateful that Washington was giving us such flexibility and support. Later, Tom Donilon told me that most of the credit for protecting our flexibility was owed to Warren Christopher, who, despite his own views, argued that Washington should back its negotiators.

Galbraith and I saw Tudjman on September 14. Tudjman wanted clarification of the American position. He bluntly asked for my *personal* views. I indicated

my general support for the offensive, but delayed a more detailed exchange for a second meeting so that I could discuss it with my colleagues and Washington.

Galbraith and I met Tudjman alone again on September 17. At the same time, by prearrangement, Clark, Hill, Kerrick, and Pardew met with Susak. Peter and I sat side by side on an ornate sofa, embroidered with gold trim, while Tudjman sat at my right in a Louis Quinze armchair.

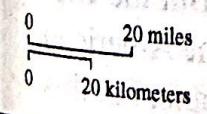
I told Tudjman the offensive had great value to the negotiations. It would be much easier to retain at the table what had been won on the battlefield than to get the Serbs to give up territory they had controlled for several years. I urged Tudjman to take Sanski Most, Prijedor, and Bosanski Novi—all important towns that had become worldwide symbols of ethnic cleansing. If they were captured before we opened negotiations on territory, they would remain under Federation control—otherwise it would be difficult to regain them in a negotiation.

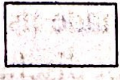
Banja Luka, I said, was a different matter. As we spoke the road to this largest Bosnian Serb city appeared to lie open to the Croatian offensive, although it was not at all certain that the city could be taken. We knew that Susak wanted to go for it as quickly as possible. On the other hand, I told Tudjman, the city was unquestionably within the Serb portion of Bosnia. Even if it were captured, the Federation would have to return it to the Serbs in any peace negotiation. Finally, capturing Banja Luka would generate over two hundred thousand additional refugees. I did not think the United States should encourage an action that would create so many more refugees. I concluded my comments with a blunt statement: "Mr. President, I urge you to go as far as you can, but not to take Banja Luka."

Since we were encouraging military action in three specific areas while objecting to it in Banja Luka, I was conscious, of course, that we could be accused of applying a double standard. But these three towns were smaller and less charged with emotional and historical baggage, and they could be retained in a negotiation. And the number of refugees that would be created weighed heavily on my mind.

Even while encouraging the offensive, Galbraith and I expressed great concern over the many refugees already displaced. We told Tudjman that there was no excuse for the brutal treatment of Serbs that followed most Croatian military successes. The abuse of Serb civilians, most of whom had lived in the area for generations, was wrong. Using a provocative phrase normally applied only to the Serbs, I told Tudjman that current Croatian behavior might be viewed as a milder form of ethnic cleansing. Tudjman reacted strongly, but did not quite deny it; if our information was correct, he said, he

# The Western Offensive, August–September 1995



-  Direction of Croat-Muslim Offensive
-  Bosnian Serb-controlled area as of July 1995
-  Croat-Muslim Federation-controlled area as of July 1995

would put an immediate stop to it. On the critical question of whether or not to take Banja Luka, Tudjman was noncommittal, although he made a strange and troubling proposal—that we “trade” Banja Luka for Tuzla, the most Muslim city in Bosnia. Galbraith leaned over to me and whispered, “This is one of his obsessions. No one else agrees with it.” I told him it was inconceivable, and it was never revived—but it had provided a momentary glimpse into his heart.

Tudjman’s proposal reflected his deep hatred of the Muslims and his dream to unite all Croats in one country, under one flag—under his leadership. He knew he could not rearrange international boundaries while the war continued, but he was testing the idea of a substantial land swap that would restructure the entire region. Under this scheme, Zagreb would gain de facto control of much of western Bosnia, which was closer physically and economically to Zagreb than to Sarajevo, while the Serbs would control much of eastern Bosnia, leaving the Muslims with a landlocked minstate around Sarajevo. We called this the “Stalin-Hitler” scenario, recalling the division of Poland in August 1939. We had repeatedly asked Tudjman to repudiate rumors of such a deal—one version of which had received wide publicity after he had discussed it informally at a dinner in London in May 1995.

Tensions were growing again between the Croats and Muslims. That same day we received alarming news: after taking the town of Bosanski Petrovac, the two sides had turned on each other, and three Croats had been killed by Muslim soldiers. Something had to be done immediately.

I asked Tudjman if he would agree to meet with Izetbegovic under American auspices to forge a common position. Sacirbey had previously suggested that we convene such a meeting, but the idea of an American Assistant Secretary of State convening two heads of state, who already knew each other well and met regularly, seemed both presumptuous and odd. The alarming incident at Bosanski Petrovac changed that: the explosive situation could undo everything that the Federation offensive had gained.

**Return to Sarajevo.** On this three-country day, we wanted to take our small jet into Sarajevo to show our confidence in the cease-fire. But the U.S. Air Force felt it was too dangerous, so, from Zagreb, we flew to the American air base in Aviano, Italy, and switched to a C-130 military cargo plane. For this flight, the Air Force was taking no chances: the crew captain, a colonel from Germany, made us don flak jackets and helmets as we crossed the coastline, and the pilot discharged chaff to confuse hostile radar as we descended into the Sarajevo valley. I sat in the cockpit with the pilots, looking for the spot on Igman where the APC had plunged off the road, and soon spied a barely dis-

cernable vertical slash of flattened trees descending from the road. We stared at it in silence for a moment before we bounced onto the runway.

I cannot describe my feelings as we returned to the very spot from which we had lifted off with the bodies of our three colleagues exactly four weeks earlier. This time the sun was out, and so was a very large press contingent, behind a rope. I said a few words and quickly moved on. On the way into the city in our armored cars, past the overturned buses and shattered buildings, we saw streets with pedestrians for the first time in months. A few people waved at the American Embassy vehicles. By the time we reached the presidency building, several hundred people had gathered across the street. As we got out of our cars, they applauded, and a few waved small American flags. The siege of Sarajevo was over.

Inside the building there was no cheering. Izetbegovic was sour and Silajdzic visibly unhappy. When I tried to discuss rebuilding Sarajevo, they ignored me. They did not believe the Bosnian Serbs would actually withdraw their heavy weapons; after all, they had not done so before. I was not pleased with this response. "You are concentrating only on the small picture," I said to Izetbegovic. "If the Serbs violate, we will resume the bombing. But if they comply, you must be ready to move forward toward peace and reconstruction."

The situation had changed too fast for these brave but isolated men to recognize how much progress had been made. Further pressure would only cause further problems. I dropped the rest of our agenda, and we parted grumpily. As we walked out, Sacirbey told me I was spending too much time with the Serbs—a standard Muslim refrain.

Our delegation went to see General Rupert Smith to encourage him to take a firm line with the Bosnian Serbs. We had a chance to break them in the Sarajevo area right then if Smith would take an uncompromising approach to implementing the agreement reached two days earlier. "This is the time to challenge the Serbs," I said. "We finally have a written arrangement and a mechanism with which we can go back to Milosevic and force compliance. We can hold the threat of resumed bombing over their heads." Smith was well known for being more aggressive than Janvier, but he hesitated. He did not want to be held responsible for what he felt was excessively rigorous enforcement.

"We must do things our way," Smith said stiffly. "Perhaps you do not understand." He went to the map and began a lengthy explanation of the battlefield situation. He still feared retaliation. "And of course we have the usual troubles communicating our instructions to all the troops," he said. By this he meant that the various nationalities serving under him reacted unpredictably to instructions. "They are conditioned to do things a certain way," he said dryly. What he meant was: some U.N. troops do not follow my orders.

As we were leaving, Smith pulled me aside, suddenly much friendlier. "Let me be clear," he said in a voice so low no one else could hear. "I cannot control the French commander of Sarajevo Sector.\* He gets his guidance directly from Janvier, and you know what that means."

We returned to Belgrade, again via Italy. If anyone was counting, observed Chris Hill, we had been in four different countries (and in Italy and Serbia twice) during the day. But we still had another three hours of talks with Milosevic ahead of us, accompanied by another heavy dinner. Milosevic seemed unconcerned about the general military situation. When Pardew and Clark told him that the Bosnian Serb forces in the west had fallen apart, he did not argue. Instead, he urged us again to convene an international peace conference in the United States as quickly as possible.

Milosevic was proud of his knowledge of America, and particularly admired the motorcycle daredevil Evel Knievel. Referring to one of Knievel's most famous (and unsuccessful) stunts, I responded, "You can't leap the Grand Canyon in two jumps. It's too early for a conference. The gap between the sides is still too great to bring you together." Milosevic shrugged; he would keep trying.

**The House with Only a Roof.** The next morning, September 19, we convened the Tujman-Izetbegovic meeting in Zagreb. In the two days since we had arranged the gathering, its urgency had increased because of an unexpected military setback for the Croats. Regular units of the Croatian Army had encountered heavy Serb resistance and high water while trying to cross the Una River on the Croatian-Bosnian border. For the first time since the offensive began, Croatian casualties had been significant, some twenty-five killed and fifty still trapped on the opposite bank. The Danish battalion in UNPROFOR, caught in the middle of the fighting, had suffered two killed and eight wounded. Furious at this violation of an international border by the Croatian Army, General Rupert Smith called to tell me that he was considering a request for NATO air strikes *against the Croats*—more a proof of his understandable rage than a real possibility.

This first serious military setback visibly changed the Croatian mood. The aggressiveness two days earlier had been replaced with a more cautious attitude. In addition, the Bosnian Serb Army had begun to stabilize its lines, encouraged by Mladic's return to the front from his Belgrade hospital bed. Intelligence reports said Mladic was digging in east of Banja Luka with heavy artillery—ironically, weapons redeployed after being withdrawn from the

\* Ironically, the man he was referring to was General Bachelet, who had been so helpful to us on Mount Igman.

Sarajevo area in accordance with our agreement. Banja Luka, swollen with refugees, still lay near the Croatian front lines, but already it seemed less open to a quick strike. The Federation would have to fight for it, which meant a big artillery battle; the Croatians, having prevented the Muslims from obtaining heavy artillery throughout the war, had the only long guns. Thus the decision on Banja Luka lay almost entirely with Tudjman.

The September 19 meeting between the two Presidents, held in a large conference room in Tudjman's palace, began badly. Izetbegovic was three hours late from Sarajevo, and this left Tudjman fuming, though the reason for the delay—bad weather, bad roads—seemed understandable enough. Except for Galbraith, none of us had ever seen the two men together before, and their intense personal animosity was worse than we had imagined.

Tudjman began aggressively. His appetite for conquest had diminished since his troops had been trapped on the river, but his anger at his Bosnian allies was ugly. "We have suffered the casualties, and we liberated eighty percent of this territory ourselves," he shouted contemptuously across the table at the diminutive Bosnian President, as forty people listened in astonishment. "Now you demand we turn over to you towns that belong to Croatia, that Croatians freed. You insist we capture areas and then turn them over to you. This is simply unacceptable." Izetbegovic shrank back into his chair, saying nothing. I watched in horror, listening through earphones to a frantic simultaneous translation. As Galbraith observed later, "It was like observing a therapy session through a one-way mirror."

Sacirbey, seated next to me, whispered urgently, "You've got to stop this. Take over before it's too late." I asked permission to make a comment, and both Presidents abruptly turned toward me. It was suddenly clear that they wanted the United States to tell them what to do—a strange moment, which we often recalled later. An aspect of the Balkan character was revealed anew: once enraged, these leaders needed outside supervision to stop themselves from self-destruction.

I began by reminding them that the main purpose of this meeting was to bring the two parts of the Federation back together. With the recent territorial gains, there was a real chance for success—but only if the Federation worked. Fighting between Croats and Muslims at Bosanski Petrovac, and the tensions over who would control each newly recaptured area, benefited only the Serbs. We could not go to a peace conference with a divided Federation.

I repeated my objections to the capture of Banja Luka, stressing that I was talking *only* about Banja Luka, and not about the rest of the offensive. Izetbegovic said nothing. This was Tudjman's decision. Listening for a moment, Tudjman turned to Izetbegovic, and asked, quite calmly, "Shall we agree with Ambassador Holbrooke?" With a shrug, Izetbegovic agreed.

Surprised at the speed with which the issue had been resolved—and the equally rapid change in Tudjman's mood—I proposed we make a joint announcement immediately after the meeting. Tudjman suggested that we make the announcement ourselves, and not in the presence of either Izetbegovic or himself. As usual, the leaders wanted to leave the impression that the Americans had pressured them to do what they probably would have done anyway.

As we left the meeting, I pulled Defense Minister Susak aside. "Gojko, I want to be absolutely clear," I said. "Nothing we said today should be construed to mean that we want you to stop the rest of the offensive, other than Banja Luka. Speed is important. We can't say so publicly, but please take Sanski Most, Prijedor, and Bosanski Novi. And do it quickly, before the Serbs regroup!"

The press was waiting outside the Presidential Palace. I told them that the two Presidents had asked the United States to announce that the offensive would not be aimed at Banja Luka. I pointedly made no mention of any other targets. However, most news stories that day left the impression that we had forced the Bosnians and Croats to "halt their victorious sweep through western and central Bosnia."\* Normally we would have tried to correct these stories, but since they sent the public message Washington wanted, we left them uncorrected.

Months later, Roger Cohen would write in *The New York Times Magazine* that preventing an attack on Banja Luka was "an act of consummate Realpolitik" on our part, since letting the Federation take the city would have "derailed" the peace process.

Cohen, one of the most knowledgeable journalists to cover the war, misunderstood our motives in opposing an attack on Banja Luka. A true practitioner of Realpolitik would have encouraged the attack regardless of its human consequences. In fact, humanitarian concerns decided the case for me. Given the harsh behavior of Federation troops during the offensive, it seemed certain that the fall of Banja Luka would lead to forced evictions and random murders. I did not think the United States should contribute to the creation of new refugees and more human suffering in order to take a city that would have to be returned later. Revenge might be a central part of the ethos of the Balkans, but American policy could not be party to it. Our responsibility was to implement the American national interest, as best as we could determine it. But I am no longer certain we were right to oppose an attack on Banja Luka. Had we known then that the Bosnian Serbs would have been able to defy or ignore so many of

\* *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1995, p. A1. One exception was Stephen Kinzer of *The New York Times*, who got it right.

the key political provisions of the peace agreement in 1996 and 1997, the negotiating team might not have opposed such an attack. However, even with American encouragement, it is by no means certain that an attack would have taken place—or, if it had, that it would have been successful. Tudjman would have had to carry the burden of the attack, and the Serb lines were already stiffening. The Croatian Army had just taken heavy casualties on the Una. Furthermore, if it fell, Banja Luka would either have gone to the Muslims or been returned later to the Serbs, thus making it of dubious value to Tudjman.

There was another intriguing factor in the equation—one of the few things that Milosevic and Izetbegovic had agreed on. Banja Luka, they both said, was the center of moderate, anti-Pale sentiment within the Bosnian Serb community, and should be built up in importance as a center of opposition to Pale. Izetbegovic himself was ambivalent about taking the city. This view was, it turned out, accurate.

After meeting in Zagreb in the late afternoon with British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind, who was touring the region, we flew back to Belgrade that night for dinner and one more session with Milosevic before returning to Washington. It was still September 19. We needed Milosevic's agreement on a framework for the New York Foreign Ministers meeting, which we planned to hold September 26. Milosevic said that he would like to see us again before the New York meeting, and requested that I either return to Belgrade, or send Owen and Hill to discuss the draft agreement.

By the time our meeting with Milosevic ended, Rifkind had reached Belgrade, and, after midnight, I went to the British Embassy to brief him again on our talks. I was so tired I fell asleep while we were talking, but Rifkind graciously pretended not to notice. I even dozed off while answering a question.

Strobe Talbott had suggested that before I return to Washington, I send Warren Christopher a personal assessment of the negotiations—a “scene setter” for the meeting of the three Balkan Foreign Ministers on September 26 in New York. Christopher intended to make New York the scene of his first personal involvement in the negotiations, and Strobe particularly wanted me to explain why the military offensive was helping the peace process; there was, he said, a growing disagreement between us and Washington on this critical point. In another example of his intellectual honesty, Strobe included himself and Christopher in the group that “needed convincing.” My informal handwritten note, sent by fax on September 20, was my first written message from the shuttle, after more than a month on the road:

I suspect that the most dramatic phase of the offensive is coming to an end, and that the recent fluidity of the front lines will gradually be replaced by a re-

turn to a relatively stable front line. . . . Contrary to many press reports and other impressions, the Federation military offensive has so far helped the peace process. This basic truth is perhaps not something we can say publicly right now. . . . In fact, the map negotiation, which always seemed to me to be our most daunting challenge, is taking place right now on the battlefield, and so far, in a manner beneficial to the map. In only a few weeks, the famous 70%-30% division of the country has gone to around 50-50, obviously making our task easier. . . .

We recognize that two potential targets should be ruled off limits: Banja Luka and eastern Slavonia. On Tuesday [September 19] in Zagreb we succeeded in getting both Tudjman and Izzy to say to us simultaneously that they would not go to Banja Luka. Both used "the American peace plan" as the excuse for this sudden burst of restraint, even though it seems likely that they did not want to go for it anyway. . . .

After these two "prohibited zones," the issue of how far is enough [for the offensive] gets murkier. In the past we weakened our credibility by flashing so many "red lights" that no one knew which ones we meant. . . . If they take Sanski Most or Prijedor, both of which are in Federation hands in the Contact Group map but which Milosevic has said he will not yield in a negotiation, it would make our job easier. . . .

Finally, a word about our support. It has been superb all the way, the best I have ever seen in an important negotiation. While I resent some of the blind quotes of a personal nature in several recent articles, I know they do not come from the core team that is supporting us. You, Strobe, Peter, Tom [Donilon], John [Kornblum], Nick [Burns], and now Beth Jones\* have been magnificent. Many thanks from all of us. See you in Washington.