CHAPTER 7

Bombing and Breakthrough

(August 28–31)

> The time will come when those few hours will say much about war and peace in Bosnia, the role that the United States played in the outcome, the real importance of France, and perhaps the world order that will reflect it.
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> —BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY, *Le Lys et la Cendre*

Paris, August 28, 1995. With the Administration facing some of the most important decisions since it took office, the "Principals," including the President and Vice President, were all on vacation. As the hours and the days blurred into one continuous crisis session, the deputies were in charge—so much so that they began teasing each other about it. "We joked," Strobe Talbott, who was acting Secretary of State, recalled later, "that it was 'deputy dogs' day,' and how we felt like the kid in *Home Alone*."

There was, of course, no joking about the issue at hand. It would prove to be one of the decisive weeks of the war, indeed a seminal week in the shaping of America's post–Cold War foreign policy. Led by Sandy Berger, who was acting National Security Advisor, the team included John White (acting Secretary of Defense), Admiral Bill Owens (acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), George Tenet (acting Director of the CIA), Undersecretary of Defense Walter Slocombe, and Undersecretary of State Peter Tarnoff. The only Cabinet-level official not on vacation was Madeleine Albright, who shuttled feverishly between Washington and New York trying to overcome the reluctance of U.N. officials to take action. The rest of the team spent much of its time hunched over the oak table in the White House Situation Room, eating cold pizzas and trying to forge a united front with our NATO allies and the U.N.

Pamela Harriman. We delayed our departure for Belgrade a day while we pressed Washington for air strikes, and set up makeshift offices at Ambassador Harriman's magnificent official residence on Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. Less than two hundred yards from the Élysée Palace, where the French President lived, the huge eighteenth-century *hôtel particulier* and large gardens would have been a powerful weapon for any diplomat; Pamela Harriman knew how to use it especially well.

Pamela Harriman was no ordinary custodian. Her nearly legendary life was endlessly revisited by breathless journalists, but the gossip obscured the fact that she had done a superb job in Paris. The French, initially impressed only with her glamorous background, which had included many years in Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s, came to realize that she was a huge asset. Believing France the key to Europe—an ironic position for a person who had spent most of her life as a British citizen and who, moreover, was the daughter-in-law of Winston Churchill—and using her ability to reach almost anyone in Washington by phone, she gained greater access for French officials to important members of the U.S. government than ever before.

She had married Averell Harriman in 1970, after both her second husband, the celebrated Broadway producer Leland Heyward, and Harriman's wife, Marie, had died. It was famously part of this story that Pamela Digby Churchill and W. Averell Harriman had had a prior relationship during World War II, when she was still married to Randolph Churchill and Harriman was President Roosevelt's personal representative in London. Almost eighty when they were reunited, Harriman was rejuvenated by his marriage to Pam, who was then fifty. During the fifteen remaining years of Harriman's life, Pam created a wonderful final act to his long and storied career. One day, near the end, as we sat in his house in the Westchester hills near New York City, I asked my old boss if there was anything he regretted in his life. Harriman, rarely given to introspection, snapped back without a moment's hesitation, "Not marrying her the first time."

As Harriman aged slowly but inexorably, Pam began to play a more prominent role. When he died in 1986, Pam continued their joint efforts on her own. A number of articles and, finally, two books portrayed her in an unflattering light, as cold and ambitious, but, although upset by the books, she pushed on, ignoring her critics.

We remained close friends and political allies throughout this period, both before and after Governor Harriman's death. Now the meeting with Izetbegovic in Paris had given us a chance, after more than twenty years of friendship, to work together during a crisis. Even in the midst of such an intense day, I could not help but take a moment to ask her if it had occurred to her how extraordinary this was. "Of course," she said. "And Averell would have been so proud of both of us."

During the day, on August 28, I met twice with Izetbegovic and Sacirbey, once at the Hôtel Crillon, the second time at the great house on the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. At the first session, Izetbegovic was still in the suit he had worn to his official meetings with his French hosts, but for the second meeting, he changed into a sort of paramilitary outfit, complete with loose khakis, a scarf, and a beret bearing a Bosnian insignia. I watched with amusement as his car drove across the courtyard of the residence, where our Ambassador awaited him at the front door, dressed in one of her trademark Courrèges dresses. Each was rendered momentarily speechless by the sight of the other—Pam, towering like a Parisian landmark over the diminutive Bosnian, not realizing for an instant that this strange person, dressed like an aging Left Bank revolutionary, was his country's President; and Izetbegovic, having one day earlier left a shattered city under siege, looking up at this astounding vision in silk.

When we finally settled down, Izetbegovic demanded that NATO launch strikes against the Bosnian Serbs immediately. Sacirbey went further, saying his President would not see us again until NATO began bombing, a position he repeated in a telephone call to Strobe Talbott. I told Sacirbey that while Strobe and I supported his desire for bombing, such threats were unacceptable.

What Do the Bosnians Want? To determine our negotiating goals, we needed to know what Izetbegovic and his government wanted. This proved far more difficult than we had expected, and began a debate that would continue for years, one that went to the heart of the matter—the shape of a postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina, and whether it would be one country, or two, or three.

That evening, for the first time, I posed to Izetbegovic and his colleagues the most important question that would need to be addressed: do you want us to negotiate a single Bosnian state, which would necessarily have a relatively weak central government, or would you prefer to let Bosnia be divided, leaving you in firm control of a much smaller country?

We would return to this issue repeatedly—and after the end of the war it would take center stage as people debated whether or not the attempt to create a single multiethnic country was realistic. Many in the West believed—and still believe—that the best course would have been to negotiate a partition of Bosnia. At the outset we were ready to consider this approach, even though it ran against the stated policy goal of both the United States and the Contact Group—but only if it were the desire of *all three ethnic groups*. Most Bosnian Serbs would want to secede from Bosnia and join Serbia itself—this was after all the issue that had led to war. Similarly, most of the Croats who lived along the strip of land in the east bordering Croatia would, given a free choice, seek

to join Croatia. But there were also many Serbs and Croats in towns and villages that were ethnically mixed or isolated who could not survive in anything other than a multiethnic state. There was no easy answer to this crucial question: to divide Bosnia-Herzegovina into two independent parts would legitimize Serb aggression and ethnic cleansing, and lands that had been Muslim or Croat for centuries would be lost forever to their rightful inhabitants. On the other hand, trying to force Serbs, Croats, and Muslims to live together after the ravages and brutality of the war, after what they had done to one another, would be extraordinarily difficult.

The key voice in this decision had to be the primary victims of the war. But Izetbegovic was not prepared to discuss the future shape of Bosnia when I first brought it up in Paris on August 28. He was focused on the necessity for immediate NATO bombing, and wary of negotiations, which had thus far resolved nothing and resulted only in broken promises. Furthermore, the Bosnians had not resolved this question among themselves. Having put all their effort into survival, they had never functioned as a government in the normal sense of the word, nor clearly defined their postwar aims. Yet despite his obvious ambivalence and confusion, even in his first response, he gave an indication of where he wanted to go: Bosnia should remain a single country, he said, but he would accept a high degree of autonomy for the Serb portion.

Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic, with whom we had a similar discussion a few days later in Zagreb, had the same overall goal in mind, but a far different structure. He wanted a stronger multiethnic central government, with, not surprisingly, a powerful prime minister. Silajdzic spoke with passion about the need to re-create a multiethnic country, although he referred to the Croats with such animosity that I did not see how he could ever cooperate with them. This internal disagreement between the Bosnian President and Prime Minister was disturbing, and was to repeat itself often in the coming months.

At the center of this tangle was the remarkable figure of Alija Izetbegovic. He had kept the "idea" of Bosnia alive for years under the most difficult circumstances. It was an extraordinary achievement, a tribute to his courage and determination. At the age of seventy, after surviving eight years in Tito's jails and four years of Serb attacks, he saw politics as a perpetual struggle. He had probably never thought seriously about what it might mean to run a real country in peacetime. Even minor gestures of reconciliation to those Serbs who were ready to re-establish some form of multiethnic community were not easy for Izetbegovic. His eyes had a cold and distant gaze; after so much suffering, they seemed dead to anyone else's pain. He was a devout Muslim, although not the Bosnian ayatollah that his enemies portrayed. Yet though he paid lip service to the principles of a multiethnic state, he was not the democrat that some supporters in the West saw. He reminded me a bit of Mao Zedong and

other radical Chinese communist leaders—good at revolution, poor at governance. But without him Bosnia would never have survived.

Three Signals from Pale. Tuesday, August 29, dawned with press reports from Washington that the Clinton Administration was urging NATO and the U.N. to respond militarily. In an editorial, *The New York Times* objected. "Diplomacy is clearly the better course," it wrote. "Mr. Holbrooke risks becoming the latest intermediary to fail at Balkan diplomacy, but he is right to try."

In Pale, the Bosnian Serbs seemed to realize they had blundered badly by shelling the marketplace. Trying to reduce the chances of air strikes, they took three revealing steps. First, they issued a statement welcoming the American peace initiative. This meant nothing, but it was a sign that Pale felt isolated and overexposed.

The second signal came directly from Karadzic, who in a fax asked former President Jimmy Carter to return to Pale to negotiate an immediate cease-fire and start peace negotiations. In public, the Administration was properly polite about Carter's role. Nicholas Burns, the State Department spokesman, said the letter to Carter "contains some potentially positive elements which we are examining carefully." In fact, however, we saw the letter as a clever attempt to lure the United States back into direct negotiations with Pale, something we had flirted with and rejected six months earlier as dangerously unproductive. Bob Frasure had been the primary architect of the strategy of negotiating solely with Milosevic; although it had not yet borne fruit, I was persuaded, as were my Washington colleagues, that it was the correct approach. While we did not want to elevate Milosevic to statesman status, we planned to negotiate only with him and, at the same time, hold him strictly accountable for the behavior of the Bosnian Serbs.

Fortunately, Carter's main contact with Washington on Bosnia was Harry Barnes, a respected former Ambassador to India, Chile, and Romania with whom my colleagues and I had worked for many years. Barnes understood that opening a direct channel to Pale at such a critical moment would undermine our strategy. After talking to Tarnoff and me, Barnes drafted a reply from President Carter to Karadzic that kept him at arm's length and ended this channel for the time being.

Pale's third and oddest effort to make direct contact came through Mike Wallace, who called me in Paris. He told me that he was in Pale, where he was taping a profile of Karadzic for *60 Minutes*. He said that they had been watching CNN together—the thought made me laugh—when an interview with me appeared and Karadzic told Wallace he would like to meet me. When Mike told him we were old friends, he asked Wallace to try to arrange a meeting the following day in Belgrade to discuss peace.

One of the toughest people in television, Wallace was trying to promote a good story, an exclusive. I laughed and told him that I would love to help him win another award, but that we would no longer meet with Karadzic unless he were part of a delegation headed by Belgrade. Mike repeated our position to Karadzic, sending a useful signal through an unexpected channel.

In view of what was about to happen, it was more than fortunate that we rejected these three probes from Pale. Had we opened any of these doors, the course of the next three months would have been significantly different.

Dîner Chez Harriman. In New York, Ambassador Albright continued her vigorous campaign with those United Nations officials she could round up; fortunately, Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali was unreachable on a commercial aircraft, so she dealt instead with his best deputy, Kofi Annan, who was in charge of peacekeeping operations. At 11:45 A.M., New York time, came a big break: Annan informed Talbott and Albright that he had instructed the U.N.'s civilian officials and military commanders to relinquish for a limited period of time their authority to veto air strikes in Bosnia. For the first time in the war, the decision on the air strikes was solely in the hands of NATO—primarily two American officers, NATO's Supreme Commander, General George Joulwan, and Admiral Leighton Smith, the commander of NATO's southern forces and all U.S. naval forces in Europe.

I asked our Ambassador in London, Admiral William Crowe, who had been Chairman of the JCS under Presidents Reagan and Bush, to make the case to his senior British counterparts for bombing, while at NATO Ambassador Robert Hunter and General Joulwan carried the case forward with our allies. We also gained vital support from the NATO Secretary-General, Willy Claes. This mattered: Claes, the former Foreign Minister of Belgium, was relatively new to his job, and this was a major decision for him; he was, after all, now advocating the biggest military action in the forty-five-year history of NATO, amidst a notable lack of enthusiasm from most of his fellow Europeans. Claes made one of those bureaucratic decisions whose importance is lost to most outside observers. Instead of calling for another formal meeting of the NATO Council to make a decision, Claes simply *informed* the other members of NATO that he had authorized General Joulwan and Admiral Leighton Smith, the commander of all NATO forces in the Mediterranean, to take military action if it was deemed appropriate. As it turned out, Claes's bureaucratic maneuver was vital; despite the decision of the London conference in July, the NATO Council would have either delayed or denied air strikes.

Izetbegovic would be busy with official events until after a dinner speech, so, to fill our evening, Ambassador Harriman put together a last-minute dinner for the delegation and a few French and Bosnian officials, including Sacir-

bey, who brought with him several friends, one of whom was the popular French *philosophe* and writer Bernard-Henri Lévy.

Although dinner was served, as always, in the impeccable manner that was Pamela Harriman's hallmark, it quickly degenerated into what must have been one of the most disjointed soirées ever held at the residence on the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. The telephone never stopped ringing, and Wes Clark and I were constantly called from the table to discuss with Washington, Brussels, or New York some new problem in the effort to start the bombing. Finally, just as Lévy was leaving, he noticed an unannounced visitor in khakis and a paramilitary beret sitting quietly in a corner in one of the grand reception rooms.

With a keen and cynical Gallic eye, Lévy described the dinner in his best-seller *Le Lys et la Cendre,* published a year later. Because Lévy was one of only two or three outsiders who ever saw the negotiating team in action, his journal notes are worth quoting in some detail—although I hope that Lévy, whom we found engaging as well as engagé, later understood that we were not, in fact, as crazy as we seemed to him that frantic evening:

> Sacirbey and I both went to the residence of the American Ambassador, the lovely Pamela Harriman. I knew Pamela Harriman slightly. . . . I had had an opportunity to appreciate her pleasant intellect, her attentiveness to others, her way of feigning ignorance to force you to talk and reveal yourself to her. And her charm. Her strange beauty that evaded the attacks of age.
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> At my table were two people whom, I must say, I couldn't place right away. Facing me, stuffed into an olive-green uniform dripping with decorations that seemed to have come from the wardrobe department of *Platoon* or *Full Metal Jacket,* was General Wesley Clark. . . . On my left was a civilian in his fifties, jovial, athletically built, with wire-framed eyeglasses. . . . He called Mohammed "Mo" and Sacirbey, in turn, unfailingly called him "Dick." At first I found him rather rude, since he was constantly leaving the table to go and answer the phone. This was Richard Holbrooke himself, the head of the peace mission, the "bulldozer diplomat," who, it was said, might be in the process of stopping the war in the Balkans. . . .
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> After Holbrooke had gotten up for the eighth or ninth time to answer telephone calls . . . I remember saying to myself, "What is going on here anyway? Does he have St. Vitus' dance? And who is he trying to impress, getting up eight times in a row in the middle of dinner?" . . .
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> It was now midnight. Pamela Harriman, who up to now had been the perfect host, began to look pointedly at her watch, as if she were suddenly in a hurry for us to leave. . . . We let ourselves be swept along in the commotion, almost a rush for the door, the reason for which we had absolutely no idea. . . . And whom did we find, lost in the immense [formal living room] that was even more imposing because it was otherwise empty? Over there, under the Renoir, perched casually

on the arm of a chair, talking on the phone in a low voice—a small scrawny guy, wearing a sort of loose-fitting jacket that looked from a distance like a painter's smock or a pajama top . . . was Bosnian President Izetbegovic. . . .

The Ambassador came over, utterly embarrassed. She let us talk for two or three minutes more . . . and then took him gently by the arm and led him over to join Holbrooke, Clark and the others. . . . My last image was of Pamela Harriman, very dignified, strangely earnest, followed in silence by Izetbegovic in his quasi pajamas and the American diplomats, all of them seemingly in awe, bathed in a wan light that made them look like conspirators caught in the act.

Of course, the next day, I had the key to this strange scene. I then realized that the Bosnian president had left the [official French] dinner, dropped by his hotel to shower and change, and then had come to join the other main actors as the major air strikes against the Serbs were launched.

I then understood that this was what Holbrooke had had on his mind during dinner, while we had been somewhat annoyed at what we perceived to be his self-importance . . . when in fact he was probably in the process of settling the last details of choreography. . . .

The time will come when those few hours will say much about war and peace in Bosnia, the role that the United States played in the outcome, the real importance of France, and perhaps the world order that will reflect it.[1]

Lévy was almost correct. The final decision to start the bombing had not yet been made, but was fast approaching—hence the drama and tension of the evening. After Lévy left, Clark spread out on the floor of the residence huge maps of Bosnia. Under Harriman's van Gogh and Picassos, Izetbegovic wandered aimlessly over the maps, trying to orient himself, while Clark's aides tried to keep the corners of the map panels aligned. The mere sight of maps, as Jim Pardew put it, "energized" the Bosnians into a deeply emotional state. Izetbegovic told us that the territorial issues—"the map"—would be far more difficult to resolve than the constitutional issues. At the time, I did not fully appreciate what he meant, but when we finally got down to serious map discussions more than two months later he was proved all too correct.

Just after midnight, after another telephone call from Washington, I pulled Izetbegovic aside. "Mr. President," I said, "we have some good news. Acting Secretary Talbott asked me to inform you that NATO planes will begin air strikes in Bosnia in less than two hours." I shook his hand warmly, but either because he was exhausted or because he had seen previous NATO bombing "campaigns" turn out to be meaningless pinpricks, he just smiled his strange smile, and slipped out into the Paris night.

The Bombs of August. Operation Deliberate Force began on August 30 at 2:00 A.M. local time. More than sixty aircraft, flying from bases in Italy and the aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt* in the Adriatic, pounded Bosnian Serb

positions around Sarajevo. It was the largest military action in NATO history. French and British artillery from the Rapid Reaction Force joined in, targeting Lukavica barracks southwest of Sarajevo. Unlike earlier air strikes, when the U.N. and NATO had restricted themselves to hitting individual Serb surface-to-air missile sites or single tanks, these strikes were massive. Planned by Admiral Smith and his brilliant Air Force commander, Lieutenant General Michael E. Ryan, the targets had been picked months in advance. General Ryan had prepared his forces for a possible bombing campaign for several years. I had examined the bulky photoreconnaissance books during a visit to Smith's headquarters high in the hills above Naples over a year earlier, and knew that NATO had photographs of thousands of targets, ranging from tiny bunkers to the new, sophisticated Serb surface-to-air system that had significantly increased the danger to NATO pilots in recent months. When the assignment came, he and Smith carried out the mission with great skill and astonishing success.

Press and public reaction was highly positive. Izetbegovic, his doubts temporarily erased, said, "The world has finally done what it should have done a long, long time ago." Senator Dole, calling the attacks "long overdue," backed them fully. Roger Cohen, *The New York Times*'s Sarajevo bureau chief, began his article: "After 40 months of awkward hesitation, NATO today stepped squarely into the midst of the Bosnian war." *The Wall Street Journal* began its news story: "The U.S. and its NATO allies, after four years of disagreement and feckless intervention . . ." The *Financial Times,* whose coverage of Bosnia had been unsurpassed, editorialized that "Western policy would not have had a shred of credibility left if there had not been a tough response." Rethinking its editorial policy overnight, *The New York Times* decided that the bombing was "a risk worth taking in this particular situation and for the purpose of sustaining the specific diplomatic initiative now under way." A *Times* article by Steven Greenhouse especially caught my eye, since it attributed to unnamed senior Washington policy makers a view at variance with mine: that "it would not be the smartest thing [for Mr. Holbrooke] . . . to show up in Belgrade this week to meet with President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia right after NATO planes bombed his Bosnian Serb brothers . . . [because] the large-scale bombing might cause Serbian nationalists to pressure Mr. Milosevic to tell Mr. Holbrooke to go away—and derail the peace initiative."

The most insightful commentary came from the Paris-based American columnist William Pfaff. He saw instantly what it would take others months to discern: that the NATO bombing marked a historic development in post–Cold War relations between Europe and the United States. "The humiliation of Europe in what may prove the Yugoslav endgame has yet to be fully appreciated in Europe's capitals," he wrote on September 1 in the *International Herald-*

Tribune. "The United States today is again Europe's leader; there is no other. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations tried, and failed, to convince the European governments to take over Europe's leadership."

Operation Deliberate Force came after a magnificent effort, quarterbacked by Berger, Talbott, and Albright on the civilian side, and Admiral Owens, John White, and Walt Slocombe for the Pentagon. When it was all over and we could assess who had been most helpful, my Washington colleagues usually singled out Kofi Annan at the United Nations, and Willy Claes and General Joulwan at NATO. Annan's gutsy performance in those twenty-four hours was to play a central role in Washington's strong support for him a year later as the successor to Boutros Boutros-Ghali as Secretary-General of the United Nations. Indeed, in a sense Annan won the job on that day.

The President, who was still in Wyoming, did not make any telephone calls himself, but he made it clear that he wanted a military response. He told Sandy and Strobe that he wanted "to hit them hard," and was ready to make calls if necessary. This evidence of the President's own determination was vital in persuading the Europeans and the U.N. that action was unavoidable.

After all the years of minimal steps, the historic decision to "hit them hard" had been made remarkably quickly. What, therefore, had caused such a sudden and dramatic change of heart, after months in which there had been no NATO action, even in response to the horrors of Srebrenica and Zepa?

Different vantage points may produce different answers to this question. When I asked my colleagues later, they cited four factors: the sense that we had reached the absolute end of the line, and simply could not let this latest outrage stand; the grim, emotional reaction of Washington after losing three close and treasured colleagues on Mount Igman; the President's own determination; and the strong recommendation of our negotiating team that bombing should take place regardless of its effect on the negotiations.

From the vantage point of the Europeans, the issue undoubtedly looked different. They had opposed massive bombing in the past because they feared their soldiers would be taken hostage by the Serbs, and because they saw the stakes in Bosnia differently. The last British troops had been removed from the Gorazde enclave just before the bombing began, thus extracting the most vulnerable forces from positions where they could be taken hostage. But because many other U.N. peacekeepers remained vulnerable, there was still great concern about, even opposition to, the bombing as it began. Despite the rule changes for bombing that came out of the London conference, I have no doubt the Europeans would have blocked or minimized the bombing were it not for Washington's new resolve. We knew from the moment the bombing started, therefore, that there would be a continued disagreement with our

NATO allies and the U.N. over its duration and its scope—and that the United States would have to keep pressing.

History is often made of seemingly disparate events whose true relationship to one another becomes apparent only after the fact. This was true of the last two weeks of August. As our negotiations gathered momentum in the weeks following the bombing, almost everyone came to believe that the bombing had been part of a master plan. But in fact in none of the discussions prior to our mission had we considered bombing as part of a negotiating strategy. Lake himself never mentioned it during his trip to Europe, and in private he had shown great ambivalence toward it. The military was more than skeptical; most were opposed. Later, the Administration was praised for—or accused of—having planned what the Chinese might have called a policy of "talk-talk, bomb-bomb." In fact, this would not have been a bad idea—both Frasure and I had long favored it—but it simply did not happen that way. It took an outrageous Bosnian Serb action to trigger Operation Deliberate Force. But once launched, it made a huge difference.

By 3:00 A.M., with the bombing under way for almost an hour, I tried to get some sleep, but General Clark came to my room with a distressing piece of news: the U.S. Air Force did not want us to travel to Belgrade because of the danger of flying in or near the war zone. Clark explained that the Air Force was especially worried that we might be shot down by Serb missiles.

This was absurd, I told Clark, and asked him to ensure that, one way or another, we got to Belgrade in the morning, even if we had to fly around the combat zone. We simply had to get there immediately to see the effect of the bombing on Milosevic and the Pale Serbs.

I rose at 7:00 A.M. on August 30 to find that during the night Clark—who seemed to operate on even less sleep than the rest of us—had persuaded the Air Force to take us to Belgrade. After a one-hour delay to coordinate a new flight path with NATO, I told him that we should start for Belgrade without confirmation that we would be able to land, and divert to Zagreb if necessary. The flight east toward the Serbian capital was very tense, even after we received word that we would be cleared to land. We spent the journey trying to figure out a response to every possible contingency we might face in Belgrade. Would Milosevic refuse to see us? Keep us waiting for a day or more? See us but refuse to discuss anything except the cessation of the bombing? Negotiate more intensively? We covered every possibility—except the one that actually occurred.

One historical analogy, however inexact, came to mind: the gamble Nixon and Kissinger had taken when they mined the harbor of Haiphong just before

the May 1972 Moscow summit. Even though they felt they were putting the summit, the centerpiece of their global diplomatic strategy, on the line, they decided to proceed with the attacks on North Vietnam. While I did not agree with the action, I respected the cool calculation involved in taking such a risk, and the fact that it had succeeded—that is, it did not wreck the U.S.-Soviet summit. Without overdramatizing the comparison, I mentioned it to my colleagues as our plane began to descend toward the military airport outside Belgrade.

Rudy Perina was waiting for us. As we drove into the city, he said there were no signs of public reaction to the bombing, which had now been going on for almost eight hours. The meeting was on, but Rudy had no idea what to expect. As we drove to the Presidential Palace, I could feel my stomach muscles tightening, as they often did before a high-risk, high-stakes meeting.

The Patriarch Paper. We had not been in Belgrade since Mount Igman, and Milosevic opened our August 30 meeting with words of sympathy about our three lost comrades. He spoke, in particular, about Bob Frasure, whom he knew better than Joe and Nelson. I was startled to hear Milosevic talk in detail about Bob's family, his farm, and his dreams for the future, and I realized, for the first time, that he and Bob must have spent a lot of time discussing personal matters.

Then, abruptly, he shifted gears. "I've been a busy man while you were away," he said, and, reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out two sheets of paper.

"I have listened carefully to your public statements," he continued. "I have been meeting with the Bosnian Serb leaders—Karadzic, Mladic, Krajisnik, Buha, all of them—all weekend and again yesterday. This is the result." He handed me the document. Not being able to read it—it was in Serbian—I handed it right back.

"This paper creates a joint Yugoslav–Republika Srpska delegation for all future peace talks," Milosevic said, using their own name for the Bosnian Serbs. "I will be the head of the joint delegation. And this document has been witnessed by Patriarch Pavle, the leader of the Serb Orthodox Church. Look here." Milosevic pointed to a single signature centered below two vertical rows of signatures, at the bottom of the second page of the document. Below the signature was the Eastern Orthodox cross.

For a moment I did not dare to believe it. For sixteen months, the Contact Group had argued fruitlessly with Milosevic over how to get the Bosnian Serbs to participate in negotiations under the Contact Group plan. Now we had the answer to the question we had asked for those sixteen months: who

would speak for Pale? And the answer was: Slobodan Milosevic. Washington's decision to negotiate with Belgrade and try to isolate Pale had produced its first success—only a procedural one, to be sure, but a real breakthrough. Genuine negotiations were about to begin.

The document—which we afterward referred to as the Patriarch Paper, as if it were the title of a Robert Ludlum thriller—gave Milosevic virtually total power over the fate of the Bosnian Serbs. They agreed to the establishment of a six-person negotiating team, with three people from Yugoslavia and three from Pale. Milosevic proudly pointed to the most important clause in the Patriarch Paper: in the event of a tie vote on any issue, the head of the delegation would make the decision. And who was the head of the joint delegation, Milosevic asked rhetorically? We already knew the answer to this—Slobodan Milosevic!

As Milosevic explained this remarkable document, I whispered to Chris Hill, "If only Bob Frasure could have seen this." Chris told me later he'd had the same thought at exactly the same moment.

Milosevic was now at his most charming. Lighting up a huge Monte Cristo cigar, he proposed that I convene an international peace conference immediately, where he could meet Izetbegovic and Tudjman and "settle everything." Such a conference was, in fact, what Washington wanted, but our talks in Paris had made it evident that the Muslims were not ready. Besides, the bombing had just begun. "We will have a conference sooner or later," I said, "but not yet."

I questioned the positions of the Bosnian Serbs. "How do you know that your friends from Pale will—"

Milosevic showed momentary anger—real or feigned, I could not tell. "They are not my friends. They are not my colleagues. It is awful just to be in the same room with them for so long. They are shit." Milosevic pronounced the last word with an Eastern European accent, so it sounded like "sheet," but I was impressed with his undiplomatic command of the English idiom.

For the next eight hours, we discussed almost every issue that we would later negotiate to a conclusion in Dayton. For the first time, everything was on the table, including several issues that had never been discussed before as part of the peace process.

War Criminals . . . and the Bombing. Not until we had talked for almost two hours did Milosevic finally bring up the bombing in Bosnia. I was struck by his lack of emotion on the subject, in contrast, for example, to his passion on the subject of lifting the economic sanctions against Serbia.

If we stopped the bombing, Milosevic said, Mladic would stop the shelling of Sarajevo. Such an offer would be favorably received in the U.N. and most

NATO capitals, and by the military; they had little enthusiasm for the bombing, and had already lost a Mirage fighter jet: two French pilots were missing and presumed captured.

I told Milosevic that if he could guarantee an end to the siege of Sarajevo, I would consider "recommending" a *suspension* of the bombing. Milosevic, repeating his performance of ten days earlier, immediately asked his faithful aide, Goran, to contact Mladic. We ate while waiting for Mladic's reply. The meal was, as usual, several different preparations of lamb, accompanied by potatoes and vegetables, and, for variety, some pork.

As we ate, Goran returned with an answer from Mladic. Milosevic read it aloud: "Mladic says that he promises to stop actions against the Muslims in Sarajevo if both NATO and the Muslims stop actions against his forces."

Typically, Mladic had tried to slip in a condition: the Bosnian Muslims would have to cease their own military activities throughout the country. This they would not do, as Milosevic well knew. He made no effort to argue Mladic's case, but turned back to a discussion of other matters. I decided to bring up, for the first time, a critical issue.

"Mr. President," I began, "there is one matter I must raise with you now, so that there is no misunderstanding later. That is the question of the International War Crimes Tribunal."

Milosevic started to object, but I pressed on. "Mr. President, two of the men who signed the Patriarch agreement are indicted war criminals—Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. They cannot participate in an international peace conference of any sort. Under international law they will be arrested if they set foot on the soil of the United States or of any member of the E.U." I also stressed that what had happened at Srebrenica and Zepa would have to be investigated.

Milosevic argued about the events surrounding the fall of the two eastern enclaves; he continued to deny any involvement in or prior knowledge of the attack. I told him we knew that Mladic, who considered himself an officer of the Yugoslav Army, had received support from their units situated just across the Serbian border from Srebrenica, from an army under Milosevic's command. "I want to be sure, since this is the beginning a serious negotiation with you as the head of a united Yugoslav-Srpska delegation," I said, "that you understand that we will not, and cannot, compromise on the question of the war-crimes tribunal."

"But you need Karadzic and Mladic to make peace," he replied.

"That is your problem. Karadzic and Mladic cannot go to an international conference. They will be arrested if they set foot in any European country. In fact, if they come to the United States, I would gladly meet them at the airport and assist in their arrest. You have just shown us a piece of paper giving you the power to negotiate for them. It's your problem."

Milosevic continued to object to the exclusion of Karadzic and Mladic from the peace process. "We should not decide this now," he finally concluded wearily. "As for Srebrenica, I repeat: I had nothing to do with it, and I didn't know it was going to happen." Then he said he would agree to allow international investigators to travel to the enclaves to gather on-site information on what had happened—a significant concession if he meant it.

We needed a break to alert Washington to the Patriarch Paper, which Milosevic wanted to make public. As I left to call Washington, I sought to dampen the upbeat mood, which had been fueled by a certain amount of scotch, wine, and plum brandy. "We'll be back soon, Mr. President," I said, "but remember, NATO planes are in the air over Bosnia as we speak."

"Yes, Mr. Holbrooke," he replied. "And you have the power to stop them."

The Press. When we arrived at the Presidential Palace in the morning, a large number of journalists were waiting outside. This had not happened before Mount Igman, before the bombing. I made a short, impromptu statement, saying that "President Clinton has sent us on a mission of peace in a moment of war." An even larger group of journalists was waiting when we left the presidency building eight hours later. We realized that a big and aggressive press corps would henceforth be following our efforts—a significant development that we would have to take into account.

By this time Milosevic had released the Patriarch Paper, and it was necessary to make some public comment about it. Deliberately seeking to downplay its significance, I said the document was "an important procedural breakthrough, but only a procedural one." In our effort to prevent optimism, we were almost too successful; John Pomfret of *The Washington Post* got it just about right, describing it as "a conciliatory move" and a "significant advance," but *The New York Times* did not even mention the document for several days.

We asked Washington not to sound too upbeat. Bosnia was not a good place for the conventional Washington "spin," that natural American style of making everything look as good as possible. I believed it was best to underplay signs of progress and minimize optimism, while simultaneously seeking to establish a sense of new American commitment and engagement. If the glass was filling up, I would prefer that we said it was still almost empty.

Thus, our original plan to maintain "radio silence" and let Washington speak for us fell by the wayside. We did not even have a press officer with us—unprecedented for a major negotiating team. But as the pace picked up, the need for carefully calibrated nuance that was more likely to be understood by journalists in the region than Washington-based reporters required a major change

in our approach to the press. The six-hour time difference created a special problem; our day was half over before most Washington officials got to the office, and they would often be asked to react early in the day to incomplete early-morning accounts of our activities on radio and television, before they could coordinate with, or sometimes even find, us. Considering this unexpected problem, Tom Donilon, Nick Burns, and White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry asked us to take the lead with the press. We continued to travel without a press officer, and, on over two hundred different flights, allowed a journalist on our small plane only twice. Relations with the press were admirably handled by Rosemarie Pauli and by the USIA press officers in the local Embassies. I encouraged every member of our small team to talk directly to journalists whenever they wanted to, provided they worked from a single script. The change in the way we dealt with the press would have far-ranging and positive consequences. The system worked well, a remarkable tribute to the dedication and discipline of our small group. With only a few relatively minor exceptions, the coverage of our efforts by the press based in the region was accurate and fair.

We returned to the Hyatt Hotel from Milosevic's office late in the evening. The sense that real negotiations had begun at last had given us a huge lift, and we stayed up half the night, reviewing our options and calling Washington and Brussels. In a handwritten note Jim Pardew captured our mood. "I've now put down the hammer I was using to beat down my own optimism," he said. "This may work."

The scene at the hotel that evening also had its comic aspects. In an effort to prevent our hosts from eavesdropping on our private conversations, General Clark had brought into the hotel a bizarre setup designed, in theory, to allow us to discuss highly sensitive matters inside our hotel rooms. Clark's team set up a small military tent inside a hotel room. Inside the tent they installed an air blower that emitted a continuous loud noise designed to "defeat" anyone trying to listen to our conversations. So, one by one, we huddled inside the tent inside the hotel room making secure telephone calls to Washington over an antiquated telephone system. But the noise from the air blower was so loud, and the secure telephone circuits often so weak, that we had to shout to be heard on the phone, thus making it easy for any listening devices (or anyone in the general vicinity) to pick us up.

The military's second device will remain forever enshrined in our memories, and we teased Wes about it endlessly long after we had abandoned it as unusable. This was a collection of bulky plastic "nose and mouth cones," which we placed over our faces so we could speak to each other in privacy. The cones smelled of old rubber, and worked only intermittently. Placed next

to one another at our small conference table, they were linked by messy wires that ran like spaghetti across the table. Sitting at the table, elbow to elbow, we talked to each other through these smelly devices, which we held over our faces. At two in the morning, after a day that was ending with a diplomatic breakthrough in Belgrade nineteen hours after its uncertain and tense beginning in Paris, these smelly, ineffective devices broke the tension. As we joked and took ceremonial photographs of everyone wearing his cone, Rosemarie came in and told us that we were yelling so loud that everyone in the hotel corridors could hear our supposedly classified conversations.

The next morning, August 31, we met briefly with the Belgrade representatives of the British, French, German, and Russian governments. The British representative, Ivor Roberts, was erudite and charming, and I respected him for his intellect and his knowledge, although he seemed excessively pro-Serb. He was impressed by the Patriarch Paper, but cautioned me, in an eloquent letter, never to forget that the Serbs felt that history had victimized them. Don't put them in a corner, Roberts urged, or they will lash back. The clear subtext was that the bombing was a mistake. I thanked Roberts for his views, and thought again of Rebecca West. The Serb view of history was their problem, I told Roberts later; ours was to end the war.

After breakfast we flew to Zagreb to give briefings to President Tudjman and Muhamed Sacirbey on the talks in Belgrade. Tudjman immediately saw the full implications of the Patriarch Paper. "Sanctions worked," he noted, "and we should keep up the military pressure."

NATO was doing just that. August 31 was, in fact, the busiest day of military action in NATO history, with planes ranging across all of northern and western Bosnia. The bombing was spreading into areas far beyond Sarajevo, areas that had nothing to do with the mortar attack. The Bosnian Serbs were stunned. I knew there would be great pressure from the U.N.

Although we clearly were not ready for a full-scale international peace conference, I wondered about some intermediate step, one that would show progress. What about a short meeting, under American auspices, of the three Foreign Ministers—something that had not taken place in over two years?

I asked both Tudjman and Sacirbey what they thought of the idea. Without hesitation, Tudjman said he would send Foreign Minister Granic to Geneva whenever we wanted. Sacirbey also agreed to go, although he expressed skepticism that anything could be accomplished without Milosevic present.

The idea of convening a meeting of the three Foreign Ministers provoked a serious debate within our delegation as we flew back to Belgrade that evening. Not everyone on our delegation supported the idea. Our designated skeptic, Bob Owen, was—well, the most skeptical. "What will we accomplish?" he

asked. "We have no position papers, no idea of what the parties will agree to. I'm not sure we are ready for this yet."

But the Patriarch agreement and the bombing had greatly strengthened our hand. It was time to see how much we could get from a preliminary meeting. We would be able to observe how the delegations interacted with one another and internally—good practice for the full-scale conference that still lay in the uncertain future. I asked Owen to start drafting the outlines of an interim, or partial, agreement. We did not consult or inform Washington.

A great deal of any good negotiation is improvisation within the framework of a general goal. After the tumultuous events of the last three days, a concept of how we should negotiate had begun to form in my mind. Although Washington wanted us to get the three Balkan Presidents together as quickly as possible, it was far too early to do this. But it was worth trying to reduce the huge differences between the parties with a series of limited interim agreements, which we could attempt to negotiate through shuttle diplomacy, then unveil in a series of quick one-day meetings at the Foreign Minister level. This might create a sense of momentum toward peace, and narrow the differences to the point where we could bring the three Presidents together.

Our negotiating team had already developed an internal dynamic that combined bantering, fierce but friendly argument, and tight internal discipline. Complete trust and openness among all seven of us were essential if we were to avoid energy-consuming factional intrigues and back channels to Washington. This presented difficulties for representatives of those agencies—the NSC, the JCS, the Office of the Secretary of Defense—that often distrusted or competed with one another and whose representatives normally sent private reports back to their home offices each day. (While Harriman and Vance could not solve this problem in 1968, Kissinger had famously solved it later by cutting everyone else out of the process, producing dramatic results in the short term and great animosity later.) We succeeded in avoiding this problem, in part because our team was so small, and in part because we shared all our information internally and developed close, even intense personal relationships. I told my colleagues that if we could not come up with a single position, each member of the team could make his viewpoint known to Washington directly—provided only that he shared his dissent with the rest of us. This system worked, and was a key ingredient in the success of our small team.