



LANDPOWER ESSAY SERIES



No. 96-1

January 1996

THE ARMY'S ROLE IN BOSNIA: THE RIGHT STEP AT THE RIGHT TIME

by

Major General Edward B. Atkeson, USA Retired

The civil war in former Yugoslavia has been one of the most brutal in modern history. The losses in the war have been staggering: a quarter of a million dead; untold numbers tortured, mutilated, raped or impoverished. People gave vent to suppressed grievances and hatreds, some dating back to the Middle Ages. However, as horrified as most Americans were at the slaughter, they could identify no U.S. vital interest in the conflict and urged their leaders to keep our involvement to a minimum.

Nevertheless, in February 1993, with a sense of responsibility to do all in our power to curtail the war and to facilitate peace, Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced that once the warring parties reached a point where peace was possible, the United States would participate by contributing troops to enforce the terms of an agreement. Now, almost three years later, the agreement is a historic fact and the president has made good the promise by ordering 20,000-25,000 troops, principally to the central sector of Bosnia, around the city of Tuzla.

Of course the peace accord did not spring full-blown from the belligerents themselves. The document required exhausting diplomatic activity by many world leaders and considerable political leveraging of all of the parties. In the fall of 1995, in the wake of some particularly aggressive acts by Bosnian Serb forces against designated United Nations' protected areas, the president called for retaliation by NATO forces, with the lion's share being delivered by U.S. air and naval contingents. He also directed that our government assume a primary role in bringing the peace agreement to fruition. The effort was crowned with success in Dayton, Ohio, in November.

Landpower Essay Series is published by the AUSA Institute of Land Warfare. The series is designed to provide an outlet for original essays on topics that will stimulate professional discussion and further public understanding of the landpower aspects of national security. The content represents the personal opinions of the author and not necessarily the position of the Association of the United States Army or its members. Candidate essays of 2000 words or less may be submitted: Association of the United States Army, Institute of Land Warfare (Attn: Landpower Essay Series), 2425 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, Virginia 22201.

In view of the terrible toll the fighting took on the former Yugoslav people and the risks the conflict posed to the security of Europe, some now ask why it took so long for NATO and the United States to get directly involved. Here one should recognize that by the time of U.S. intervention four important new conditions had evolved:

- War weariness was widespread;
- Serbia had dropped its demands for territorial aggrandizement and had thrown its weight against continued hostilities.
- Croatia had recovered its former district of Krajina, which had been in rebellion by resident Serbs. (Croatia is also scheduled, as a result of the peace agreement, to regain its territory in eastern Slavonia within the next two years).
- As the result of indictments of key Bosnian Serb leaders on war crimes charges by the International Tribunal in the Hague, the Bosnia Serbs were willing to be represented by the Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, in peace negotiations in Ohio.

In addition, the belligerents had come to realize that certain concessions could be made without sacrificing vital interests:

- Both Croatia and Serbia had come to accept the existence of Bosnia-Herzegovina as a multi-ethnic state within historic borders, with its capital in an undivided city of Sarajevo.
- The Bosnia Serb Republic (Republika Srpska) could be recognized as a legitimate political entity within the Bosnian state.
- The Bosnia Muslims and the Bosnian Croats realized that their fortunes were best served by close cooperation in a federation rather than independently addressing their problems.

Because of these new conditions, President Clinton's order is timely and makes sense. With the new conditions clearly in mind, the United States led NATO action to halt the war and to bring the parties to the bargaining table. The tools included both the "stick" of bombing and the "carrot" of fair and impartial peace negotiations. In the leading role, the president placed both the military and diplomatic prestige of the United States on the line.

Such a commitment could not be taken lightly. National prestige is a major component of security in international affairs. To a large extent it determines the degree to which a nation's voice will be heard and heeded. It affects treaties, trade, respect for law and the rights and safety of a nation's citizens traveling abroad. While analysts may differ as to whether the United States has interests in Bosnia meriting the dispatch of troops, few will argue that the country's stature and prestige can be lightly abandoned once the issue is defined and joined.

In dispatching troops, the president acted in his constitutional role as commander in chief. He made it clear that the forces would be under American command as part of a NATO expeditionary force. They are to be accompanied by detachments from a host of other nations. They are to be deployed for approximately a year. They will be supported by American and other allied air and sea forces, and will operate under rules of engagement designed to maximize the safety of every soldier. The selection of the U.S. 1st Armored Division as the core element will make the American contingent the most powerful force in the country.

The primary and secondary missions of the forces, the separation of the indigenous military formations in the field and the support of relief agencies operating in the country, involve tasks for which U.S. Army troops are thoroughly trained and fully familiar. Mine clearing, road repair, food distribution and protection of refugees, to name a few, are capabilities found in almost every soldier's knapsack. The troops deploying have a "can do" attitude toward their assignments because they are confident they can do them.

While it is not the intent of the United States to serve as the world's policeman, the Army must be prepared to deal with situations of this sort whenever the national leadership is obliged to exercise its responsibilities for leveraging the prestige of the United States to resolve problems impinging on national interests.

The U.S. Army is uniquely qualified to deal with exactly these challenges. The Army is the service of land-dominance and of immediate and uninterrupted intimidation wherever necessary. Springing directly from the heart and soul of the American people, it is capable of an enormous range of tasks, from providing aid and succor to victims of natural or man-made disasters, to wreaking virtual total destruction on any opposition threatening American interests or seeking to deny the Army successful accomplishment of its assigned missions.

In fulfilling this role the Army must, in turn, be supported by the American people and by their elected representatives. It must be regularly granted an adequate and measured flow of resources to maintain its edge. Equipment must be developed and procured and the young men and women who serve in its ranks must be trained and cared for.

The Army is not the massive, draft-dependent organization that fought the country's wars in mid-century. It is a smaller, more select force; better educated and more professional. It is also largely a married force, and many of the soldiers are women. Some U.S. Army Reserve or National Guard formations will round out the active component. Therefore, the authorized strength ceilings of both Army active and reserve forces must be weighed when assessing the service's capability to meet immediate demands, such as Bosnia, and yet maintain necessary capabilities to deal with the demands of major regional contingencies.

At the present time, U.S. soldiers are serving in peacekeeping roles in Haiti, Egypt, Macedonia, Croatia and Albania. The new mission will add heavy requirements in Hungary and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Public officials responsible for determining the quality and quantity of resources to be made available to the Army must take these facts into consideration when they make their allocations. An underfunded, overloaded service, without the wherewithal to take care of its soldiers, will soon become a hollow one.

Soldiers know that loyalty is a two-way street. Just as they owe their loyalty to the nation and to their military and political superiors, those leaders owe them a continuing loyalty of care, support, respect and appreciation.

(Major General Atkeson is currently a Senior Fellow for the Institute of Land Warfare.

###