

Foreign Policy-Making in the Clinton Administration: Reassessing Bosnia and the “Turning Point” of 1995¹

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Introduction

The conflict that ravaged Bosnia-Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995 was one of the central international problems that the Clinton White House had to face during its first term. The “issue from hell”, as Warren Christopher famously dubbed it in 1993³, was emblematic of the Clinton administration’s failure, during the period of January 1993 to late summer 1995, to formulate foreign policies that could produce the results desired by the policy-makers in the West Wing.

Bosnia caused the administration many headaches during those two and a half years, but it also illustrates Clinton’s comeback on foreign affairs. On the surface, a dramatic change in the administration’s handling of the Bosnian question can be observed starting in late August 1995, when the administration adopted a policy that proved successful. Strategic bombing by NATO forced the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table and a peace accord was struck under American leadership at Dayton, Ohio, the following November. The Dayton Accords, officially signed by the parties on December 14 in Paris, formalized the cease-fire and provided for the deployment of American ground troops as part of the IFOR mission, ending the war in Bosnia.

The resolution of the Bosnian war is usually (and justly) attributed to renewed US resolve to bring its full military and diplomatic might to bear on the problem in the Balkans⁴. It is also considered a major turning point in Clinton’s eight-year tenure

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³ Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy*, Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2000, p. 36f.

⁴ Major books and articles on US involvement in Bosnia include Ivo H. Daalder, *op. cit.*; Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, Revised Edition, New York, The Modern Library, 1999; David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2001; Madeleine Albright (with Bill Woodward), *Madam Secretary*, New York, Miramax

in the Oval Office. While the Clinton team was generally perceived to be weak on foreign affairs for the best of three years⁵ (from 1993 to the end of 1995), the President bounced back with Bosnia and made foreign policy one of the most successful dimensions⁶ of his second term in office, boosting his stature and public approval, and paving the way for a reassessment of his entire foreign affairs record by the time he left the White House in 2000.

The question of the need for US involvement to achieve a settlement in the Bosnian conflict and broker the ensuing peace will not be addressed here, as it has been given ample treatment elsewhere⁷. Rather, we will assess the relationship between the breakthrough on Bosnia in mid-1995 and the course of the Clinton presidency. To do so, we will examine the genesis of the changes that led to the salutary shift in American policy in the second part of 1995. We will therefore revisit the explanations that have been proposed for the shift, such as the changing situation on the ground in Bosnia during the spring and summer of 1995, concern about the presidential election of 1996, and a clash with Congress over the President's authority to set the foreign affairs agenda. We believe these analyses lack depth, for the factors they advance cannot, in and of themselves, explain why the shift took place at the time it did.

Books, 2003, p. 177-193; Robert C. DiPrizio, *Armed Humanitarians: U.S. Interventions from Northern Iraq to Kosovo*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 103-129; Jane M.O. Sharpe, "Dayton Report Card", *International Security*, 22, Winter 1997/98, p. 101-137; Misha Glenny, "Heading Off War in the Southern Balkans", *Foreign Affairs*, 74, May/June 1995, p. 98-108; Charles G. Boyd, "Making Peace with the Guilty", *Foreign Affairs*, 74, September/October 1995, p. 22-38; International Commission on the Balkans, *Unfinished Peace: Report of the International Commission on the Balkans*, New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996; Bob Woodward, *The Choice*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996; Wayne Bert, *The Reluctant Superpower. United States' Policy in Bosnia, 1991-1995*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1997; Elizabeth Drew, *The Clinton Presidency*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 138-163; Samantha Power, "A Problem From Hell". *America and the Age of Genocide*, New York, Basic Books, 2002, p. 293-327; David Gompert, "The United States and Yugoslavia's Wars", in Richard Ullman (ed.), *The World and Yugoslavia's Wars*, New York, a Council on Foreign Relations Book, 1996, p. 122-144; Fouad Ajami, "Under Western Eyes: The Fate of Bosnia", *Survival*, 41, Summer 1999, p. 35-52;

⁵ See the special issue of *Foreign Policy*, January/February 1996, for a critical appraisal of Clinton's accomplishments on the international stage during his first term, particularly William G. Hyland, "A Mediocre Record", p. 69-75, and Richard H. Ullman, "A Late Recovery", p. 76-79.

⁶ We are aware that there is no decisive way to ascertain what constitutes a "success", as opposed to a "failure", in (foreign) policy, as this categorization can only remain a matter of scholarly interpretation. However, for the sake of our argument, we will limit ourselves to considering a "success" as a situation in which the results obtained match the expectations of the decision-makers. Bosnia, after August 1995, clearly fits this description.

⁷ See Jane M.O. Sharpe, *loc.cit.*, p. 113. The importance of America's role in settling the conflict is also discussed by Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*, Amonck, M.E. Sharpe, 1999, p. 320; Mark Pecenny and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, "Liberal Interventionism in Bosnia", *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 28, Spring 1998, p. 15-19; and Leonard J. Cohen, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fragile Peace in a Segmented State", *Current History*, 95, March 1996, p. 104-107.

These explanations neglect the decision-making process *per se*, which was in fact of the utmost importance, as Ivo H. Daalder has argued in an article entitled “Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended”⁸, and subsequently in his book, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy*⁹. The settlement of the Bosnian problem in the second part of 1995 was due in large part to two important changes in the policy-making process that took place prior to that date, mainly in the spring and summer of 1995. Without Anthony Lake’s emergence as an effective leader of the system¹⁰, which ultimately produced the new policies of mid-1995, and without stronger presidential leadership in the foreign policy decision-making process, the other aforementioned factors probably would not have been enough to so dramatically improve the effectiveness of the administration’s Bosnia policy.

We will expand on Daalder’s thesis by examining the impact of decision-making factors not only in the case of Bosnia but on Clinton’s foreign policy as a whole. Only by considering the importance of the decision-making process in a wider context can we understand Bosnia as the first instance of a new, more effective approach to foreign policy-making by the Clinton administration. Bosnia finally became a success story in late 1995 because the foundations of a functioning system had been laid earlier in the year. This explains why Bosnia did not prove to be an “island of success in an ocean of blunders” but rather a major turning point for the administration¹¹. Once an effective system was in place, other issues could be addressed successfully.

Clinton’s Bosnia policy, 1993-1995

During his campaign for the presidency, Governor Clinton had criticized the incumbent Bush administration for its deferential attitude towards the Europeans and the United Nations¹². In July 1992, he came out in favour of using force against Serbia, which was labeled the main culprit in the wars tearing apart the former Yugoslavia. Following the advice of Anthony Lake¹³ (who would become his National Security Adviser), Clinton supported air strikes, to be used primarily to keep the roads open for humanitarian aid convoys¹⁴. The following month,

⁸ Ivo H. Daalder, “Decision to Intervene: How the War in Bosnia Ended”, *Foreign Service Journal*, December 1998, available on the Brookings Institution website at www.brookingsinstitution.org/dybdocroot/Views/Articles/Daalder/1998FSJ.htm (page consulted on February 28, 2004).

⁹ Ivo H. Daalder, *op.cit.*

¹⁰ See Power, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

¹¹ This is David Halberstam’s assessment, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

¹² For an assessment of the importance of foreign issues in Clinton’s 1992 campaign, see George Szamuely, “Clinton’s Clumsy Encounter with the World”, *Orbis*, Summer 1994, especially p. 373-383.

¹³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 82.

¹⁴ “Statement by Governor Bill Clinton on the Crisis in Bosnia”, July 26, 1992. See Ivo H Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 6; also, Reneo Lukic and Allen Lynch, “La paix américaine pour les Balkans”, *Études Internationales*, 27, September 1996, p. 560.

candidate Clinton proposed the lifting of the international arms embargo against the Bosnian Muslims,¹⁵ establishing the framework of the “lift and strike” policy (lift the embargo and conduct air strikes) which the Clinton team would pursue in the White House.

During its first half-year in power, however, the Democratic administration was forced to backtrack on those promises. Various factors explain the about-face. First, the French and British governments took a firm stand against the “lift and strike” policy in May 1993¹⁶. In their opinion, as long as the Americans were unwilling to commit ground troops in support of their military option, partially lifting the embargo would only risk prolonging the war, while NATO air strikes would be risky to their own troops on the ground¹⁷.

Secondly, confronted by the real-world difficulty of trying to convince the foreign powers on the ground of the merits of the American proposal to act alone, the President’s staff seems to have quickly come to the conclusion that Bosnia could put Clinton on dangerous political terrain domestically¹⁸. Unless there were a quick and easy win, Bosnia could become a liability to the President. Clinton and his staff therefore tried to keep Bosnia out of the spotlight. As DiPrizio observes, “determined to get Bosnia out of the public eye, the Clinton team adopted a hands-off policy and abdicated leadership to NATO and the United Nations.”¹⁹ Following the advice of his political strategist at the time, Dick Morris, Clinton steered clear of Bosnia, wary of repeating Lyndon Johnson’s mistake and becoming entangled in a foreign war that would hamper his ability to push forward his domestic agenda²⁰.

Thirdly, Clinton did not want to devote much time to international matters in any event. Fulfilling his campaign promise to focus on the economy “like a laser beam”²¹, the President kept his distance from the decision-making process on foreign policy in general and Bosnia in particular.

¹⁵ DiPrizio, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁶ See Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

¹⁷ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 6, 12; DiPrizio, *loc. cit.*, p. 120; Lukic and Lynch, *loc. cit.*, p. 560; Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

¹⁸ DiPrizio, *op. cit.*, p. 120 and 213f; Ajami, *loc. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁹ DiPrizio, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

²⁰ Ajami, *loc. cit.*, p. 45.

²¹ Interview with Clinton on *Nightline: ABC News*, November 4, 1992.

Fourth, the “Principals”²² were divided between differing and sometimes contradictory positions. Without a consensus, the decision-making process would then usually come to a halt²³. In the meetings at which the “lift and strike policy” was thrashed out, for example, the more hawkish Al Gore, Anthony Lake and Madeleine Albright favored air strikes, while the dovish Warren Christopher and Les Aspin supported a diplomatic solution to the war and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell (soon to be replaced by John Shalikashvili), argued that air strikes should be carried out only if coupled with a ground effort (something Clinton would not approve) and a sound exit strategy²⁴. Daalder comments: “In the absence of a consensus among his advisers – or even majority support for a single option – Clinton deferred a final decision on what to do.”²⁵

These four factors ultimately converged. Inability to convince the United States’ Western allies of the soundness of the American strategy (the Clinton team had always insisted that any intervention in Bosnia needed to be multilateral²⁶), aversion to the political risks entailed by any forceful engagement in Bosnia, intermittent attention to the problem by the President and internal strife among the key players prevented the administration from reaching consensus on what to do and how to implement a workable strategy. For 30 months, equivocation and indecisiveness were the hallmark of Clinton’s Bosnia policy, giving it the appearance of an ongoing damage control operation²⁷.

Events in Bosnia provided a series of opportunities during this period, but American policy failed to focus effectively on the problem. Early in 1994, Albright, Lake, and the new Defense Secretary, William Perry, reached a tentative consensus among the Principals in favor of renewed US diplomatic leadership, to be exercised through threats against the Serbs and an alliance with the Bosnian Croats and Muslims²⁸. The shelling of the market in Sarajevo on February 5 could have triggered the execution of the new American strategy. However, the

²² The members of the Principals Committee constitute a formal body of the NSC system. During the period covered by this paper, the “Principals” were President Clinton; Vice President Al Gore; National Security Advisor (NSA) Anthony Lake; UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright; Secretary of State Warren Christopher; Secretary of Defense William Perry; CIA Director James Woolsey, succeeded by John Deutch; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, succeeded by John Shalikashvili; Deputy NSA Sandy Berger; and National Security Advisor to the Vice President Leon Fuerth. For a detailed description of Clinton’s national security apparatus and the Principals Committee, see Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 86, and Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge*, p. 145.

²³ Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

²⁴ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 11-19.

²⁵ *Idem*.

²⁶ Notably in Clinton’s news conference explaining his decision to dispatch Anthony Lake and Warren Christopher to London and Paris to try to convince the Europeans of the merits of “lift and strike”. See “The President’s News Conference; May 14, 1993”, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: William J. Clinton, Vol. I*, National Archives and Records Administration, 1994, p. 660.

²⁷ Ajami, *loc. cit.*, p. 45.

²⁸ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 24.

necessary conditions for such a decision do not appear to have existed at the time. Doubts about the real perpetrators of the shelling made Clinton hesitate. He tasked Albright to work out a response through the UN, and sent Christopher to consult with the Allies²⁹. No forceful engagement in Bosnia ensued.

During the fall of 1994, fighting around the “safe area” of Bihac opened a rift between the US and its allies, sparking a major crisis within NATO³⁰. In the end, the administration abandoned the idea of ending the conflict by conducting unilateral bombardments in order to preserve NATO unity. At the end of 1994, there seemed to be no winning scenario for American involvement in Bosnia.

External, electoral and political factors in the policy shift of 1995

It is clear that an important change in the Clinton administration’s conduct of foreign policy in relation to Bosnia occurred in the course of 1995. After two and a half years of alternating hesitation and frustration, a breakthrough came in the third quarter of the year. The contrast was startling. Many factors can and have been advanced to explain the shift. Authors who treat the question attribute varying degrees of importance to each, and often consider them to be intertwined. We will look at the shortcomings of analyses that focus primarily on external, electoral or political factors to explain Clinton’s comeback concerning Bosnia.

External factors

One understanding of the matter is that Serb military actions left the West (and the US) with little alternative but to intervene forcefully at the end of the summer of 1995³¹.

That shift [the American policy reversal of late 1995] stemmed from a decision, reached by the Bosnian Serb leadership in early March [1995], that the fourth year of the war would be its last. The Bosnian Serb objective was clear: to conclude the war before the onset of the next winter. The strategy was simple, even if its execution was brazen. First, a large-scale attack on the three eastern Muslim enclaves of Srebrenica, Zepa, and Gorazde -- each an international 'safe' area lightly protected by a token U.N. presence -- would swiftly capture these Muslim outposts in Serb-controlled Bosnian territory. Next, attention would shift to Bihac -- a fourth, isolated enclave in north-western Bosnia -- which would be taken over with assistance from Croatian Serb forces. Finally, with the Muslims on the run, Sarajevo would become the grand prize, and its capture by the fall would effectively conclude the war.”³²

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³¹ In her memoirs, Madeleine Albright identifies the Serbs’ “campaigns of brutality” in Bosnia, supposedly orchestrated by Slobodan Milošević, as an important factor that prompted the administration to act; see p. 177, 178, 185.

³² Daalder, “Decision to Intervene”, (p.1-2).

The Bosnian Serbs implemented that plan and launched a frightful campaign as soon as the weather turned warm in May 1995. In a brutal act of ethnic cleansing, the Serbs overran the “safe area” of Srebrenica from July 6 to 16, killing almost 8,000 people, including 7,000 men of all ages³³. According to Daalder, the fall of Srebrenica,

[...] was the West’s greatest shame. [...] Guilt led senior representatives of the United States and its key allies to agree in London a few days later [July 21] that NATO would make a strong stand at Gorazde by defending the town’s civilian population. [...] The allies agreed that an attack on, or even a threat to, Gorazde would be met with a “substantial and decisive” air campaign. [...] A few days later [August 1], the North Atlantic Council worked out the final operational details of the air campaign and passed the decision to NATO’s military commanders on when to conduct the strikes.³⁴

Sharpe also draws a direct link between the course of the war and the decision by the White House to intervene at last: “The Western powers’ impotence to prevent the massacre of some 8,000 Muslims in one of the so-called safe areas convinced Clinton of the need to engage the Serbs militarily.”³⁵ This view is echoed by David Halberstam, who says that “The crimes of Srebrenica finally pushed the West over the brink”³⁶.

Those who focus on this set of external factors argue that, after the fall of Srebrenica, the US and its Western allies, driven by a newfound resolve to stop the Serbs and end the war, were prepared to enter the fray in response to any triggering event. Although Zepa did fall on July 25 and a Croat-Muslim offensive was launched on August 4,³⁷ the watershed event turned out to be the shelling of the Sarajevo market on August 28, which killed 37 and wounded 80³⁸. At that point, all was in readiness and NATO’s Operation Deliberate Force began on August 30.

Electoral considerations

The Clinton administration has been called a “permanent campaign presidency”³⁹ and it has been suggested that Clinton pursued a “minimalist” foreign policy that was responsive mainly to issues that had domestic impact⁴⁰. Discussions of the

³³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. xvi; “Decision to Intervene”, (p. 2); Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 187; Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 294-297; Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³⁴ Daalder, “Decision to Intervene”, (p. 2).

³⁵ Sharpe, *loc.cit.*, p. 112.

³⁶ Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

³⁷ See Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 120-124, and Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 72-73.

³⁸ Elizabeth Drew, *Showdown: The Struggle between the Gingrich Congress and the Clinton White House*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 254.

³⁹ Stanley Renshon, *High Hopes. The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition*, New York, New York University Press, 1996, p. 272.

⁴⁰ James McCormick, “Clinton and Foreign Policy: Some Legacies for a New Century”, in Steven Schier (ed.), *The Postmodern Presidency. Bill Clinton’s Legacy in U.S. Politics*, Pittsburgh,

factors that led to the NATO air strikes of September 1995 have noted that electoral considerations were very important to the President and his political staff at the time. As DiPrizio puts it, "In the end, the administration's biggest fear was that Bosnia would explode in Clinton's face during his upcoming reelection campaign"⁴¹. *New York Times* reporter Stephen Engelberg reported at the time:

Mr. Clinton's senior advisors have come to see the Bosnia issue as a political time bomb that could go off in the 1996 campaign. Some fear the administration's entire foreign-policy record will ultimately be judged on the outcome of the Bosnia crisis.⁴²

Bob Woodward, cited by DiPrizio, concurred: "[Bosnia] had long been a "cancer on Clinton's entire foreign policy -- spreading and eating away at its credibility."⁴³

On this view, electoral considerations prompted Clinton to pressure his foreign policy staff to devise an effective policy on Bosnia:

Frustrated and exasperated by a policy that "wasn't working", Clinton ordered his staff to find a way out of the Bosnian impasse. Dick Morris reinforced the message, telling the White House staff that if Bosnia was not settled it would threaten the 1996 campaign. Nevertheless, it would not be easy. A political success in Bosnia would probably mean an American commitment of troops -- a risky option for a president facing reelection. On the other hand, if successful in ending the fighting, Clinton would go into the election campaign with a major foreign policy gain [...] Clinton gambled, and it paid off. He launched a new, and ultimately successful, initiative to settle the war in Bosnia.⁴⁴

In the environment of permeability between domestic and foreign issues, it was feared that Clinton's image of helplessness on Bosnia would make him "look bad" on foreign affairs in general and present an easy target for a Republican candidate, costing Clinton valuable votes in 1996. Some observers therefore believe that the quest for an effective policy was, first and foremost, a matter of domestic political calculation.

The clash with Congress

The mid-term elections of 1994 were disastrous for Clinton and the Democratic Party. In what was termed a "conservative revolution", both chambers of Congress fell to Republican control in November 1994. Starting in January 1995, the 104th Congress fought the President on almost every issue that Clinton considered important. In the late spring and summer of 1995, Bosnia became

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000, p. 60-83; Michael Cox, *US Foreign Policy after the Cold War. Superpower Without a Mission?* London, Pinter, 1995, p. 8-20.

⁴¹ DiPrizio, *op.cit.*, p. 126.

⁴² Stephen Engelberg, "How Events Drew the US into Balkans", *New York Times*, August 19, 1995, p. 1-2. This argument was also taken up by Lukic and Lynch, *loc. cit.*, p. 563.

⁴³ Bob Woodward, *op.cit.*, p. 255, cited in DiPrizio, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴⁴ William G. Hyland, *Clinton's World: Remaking American Foreign Policy*, Westport, Praeger, 1999, p. 143.

another step in a series of clashes between the executive and the legislative branches of the federal government.

On June 8, the House of Representatives voted 318-99 to partially lift the across-the-board international arms embargo against all the warring parties in Bosnia⁴⁵. The move was based on a “balance-of-power” argument: the war in Bosnia had dragged on because the UN-imposed embargo was preventing the Bosnian Muslims from defending themselves. While the Bosnian Serbs were backed by the Yugoslav army (that is, the armed forces of Serbia) and the Bosnian Croats by the Croatian national army, the Bosnian Muslims were hamstrung by the indiscriminate arms embargo, which appeared to penalize only them. Since the Muslims were widely perceived as the main victims of the war, support for the embargo was a tenable position only if one were ready to assist them militarily. If the Clinton White House was not ready to do so (and members of Congress were not in favour of such a commitment in any event⁴⁷), then lifting the embargo made sense, argued supporters of the bill⁴⁸.

It is important to note that the lifting of the arms embargo was part of an aggressive Republican House bill on the larger issue of foreign aid, which would have slashed the aid program, reduced the importance of USAID, USIA and ACDA (by “downgrading” them from agencies to bureaus within the State Department), and called for a tougher stance against, notably, Cuba, China, and North Korea⁴⁹. Clearly, the bill was an attack on Clinton’s conduct of foreign policy. The President had already vowed, on May 23, to veto any such bill⁵⁰. On July 25, the Senate started debating the Dole-Lieberman resolution, which similarly called for the lifting of the embargo. It passed by a 69-29 vote⁵¹ and, true to his pledge, Clinton vetoed it on August 11⁵².

⁴⁵ Drew, *Showdown*, p. 248. After the spectacular failure of “lift and strike”, the Clinton administration had reversed its position on the embargo and decided to support it, partly to preserve unity with its allies.

⁴⁶ Efforts in the Congress to lift the embargo were led largely by Senate majority leader Bob Dole, who, already in 1996, was considered a likely presidential candidate for the Republican Party. See Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 302-303.

⁴⁷ See Ryan C. Hendrickson, *The Clinton Wars: The Constitution, Congress, and War Powers*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2002, p. 83-85.

⁴⁸ Elaine Sciolino, “Clinton’s Policy on Bosnia Draws Criticism in Congress”, *New York Times*, June 8, 1995, p. A1; Melissa R. Michelson, “How Americans Think about Foreign Military Involvement: The Case of Bosnia”, *International Studies Notes*, 23, Spring 1998, available online at <http://csf.colorado.edu/isa/isn/23-2/108401bmichelson.htm> (page consulted on February 23, 2004).

⁴⁹ Drew, *Showdown*, p. 248-249; Katharine Q. Shelve, “House Votes to Lift Bosnia Arms Ban: But Measure, Part of Foreign Aid Bill, May Doom Entire Package”, *New York Times*, June 9, 1995, p. A12.

⁵⁰ Drew, *Showdown*, p. 251.

⁵¹ *Idem.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

The battle over the arms embargo can be seen as an episode in the wider war between the President and Congress over what was to be done in Bosnia. As Drew writes,

The President's decision to get more involved [in Bosnia], one official said, had a lot to do with the more confrontational Congress. An adviser said, "He was about to lose control of foreign policy on a fundamental issue." He added, "The passage of the Dole bill made the President and others more aware of the political danger, that Congress could do real damage to American foreign policy [...] The administration knew it had to get back on the offensive."⁵³

This was an important factor, some believe, in bringing Clinton to focus on a workable solution for Bosnia.

Shortcomings of the external, electoral and political explanations

While the three sets of factors outlined above undoubtedly contributed to the process that led to the reversal in America's handling of the war in Bosnia, they cannot, by themselves, give us a clear understanding of the policy shift. This conclusion stems from a simple observation: all the factors we have mentioned were already in play at various points prior to August 1995, yet they evidently were not sufficient to produce effective policy.

First, as far as the situation on the ground is concerned, it could easily have justified US action much earlier than the summer of 1995, especially given Clinton's stated resolve during the 1992 campaign. A string of appalling events that aroused alarm in Western democracies – the siege of Sarajevo, which was almost a year old when Clinton entered the White House, the shelling of the town's marketplace in February 1994, which killed 68 and wounded 200, the campaign against Bihac during the fall of 1994, the various assaults on Muslim enclaves during the spring of 1995 (during which some UN peacekeepers were held hostage by the Serbs⁵⁴) – provided a series of "opportunities" that could have legitimated an intervention on humanitarian grounds. It is true that the situation deteriorated further in the spring and summer of 1995, but how can we explain the fact that the US acted after the shelling of Sarajevo, and not a week or a month earlier? There is no conclusive evidence that it was the accumulation of horrors alone that pushed the US to act at the time it did.

Secondly, electoral considerations were certainly taken into account by the Clinton team, but deeper analysis suggests that this was a peripheral factor in the "turning point" of 1995. For one thing, there does not appear to be any reason why Clinton's political staff, who for two and a half years had been urging the President to steer clear of Bosnia as far as possible, would have supported a change in attitude during the summer of 1995. A confused and "wimpy" image on foreign affairs could have been expected to loom over Clinton's 1996 campaign

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁵⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 245.

no matter what, as his record up to that point was disastrous. Given the approach to foreign policy as “all politics”, Clinton’s negative approval ratings on Bosnia up to the fall of 1995⁵⁵ should have led the President’s advisers either to propose a tougher stance earlier on (to maximize the chances of reversing the trend) or to stay the course and keep the President away from Bosnia. Therefore, while public opinion was indeed taken into account, it does not appear to have been decisive in shaping policy. Moreover, there was no indication that a policy shift would necessarily lead to a foreign affairs, and for that matter to a domestic, success. The risks associated with the deployment of American ground troops in Bosnia remained high, and a disaster in Bosnia, which remained possible, could have been costly to the President during his reelection campaign.

Thirdly, the clash with Congress was over an issue which, as we have observed, reached well beyond Bosnia alone. It is hardly possible to disentangle the role of the Bosnian question and determine the specific role it played in the positions taken by the 535 congressmen and women, or in Clinton’s thinking in relation to the larger issue of presidential control over American foreign policy. But this was a matter in which Clinton had shown little interest until the summer of 1995, so it is questionable whether fear of losing control to Congressional Republicans would have so shaken the President that it induced him to reform his decision-making style. To account for such a dramatic change in conduct over legislative-executive separation of powers, one that entailed a complete transformation of the president’s *modus operandi*, this should have been an issue about which Clinton cared deeply. Clinton, however, had shown no evidence of that prior to June or July 1995. We would conclude that a desire to retain some control over foreign policy did exist but was not powerful enough, by itself, to trigger a major shift in the handling of Bosnia.

The importance of process

We concur with the general conclusion reached by many observers that the decision-making process appears to have been largely the key in the policy shift of 1995. Specifically, two factors can be considered of utmost import: first and foremost, Anthony Lake’s newfound dynamism, which led to a “revolution” in policy-making and implementation, coupled with Clinton’s positive and sustained involvement in the policy-making process⁵⁶, mainly by giving Lake his full support and by attending the meetings of the Principals.

As Daalder⁵⁷, Holbrooke⁵⁸, Halberstam⁵⁹, and Drew⁶⁰ have argued at length, the overhaul of US policy on Bosnia did not “pop out of nowhere” at the end of the

⁵⁵ See Michelson, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁶ This is what Madeleine Albright calls in her memoirs “Bill Clinton’s willingness to lead”, which she identifies as a critical factor in ending the Bosnian war. See *op. cit.*, p. 189-190.

⁵⁷ Daalder, “Decision to Intervene”, (p.3-6); *Getting to Dayton*, chap. 2 and 3, p. 37-116.

⁵⁸ Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, chap. 5, 6, 7, especially p. 63-111.

⁵⁹ Halberstam, *op. cit.*, chap. 26, 27, 29, especially p. 309-318 and 332-340.

⁶⁰ Drew, *Showdown*, chap. 19, p. 243-255.

summer of 1995. There is general agreement on the course of events at the White House starting in late 1994 and culminating in the launch of Operation Deliberate Force on August 30, 1995.

According to Daalder's research, things started moving after the Bihac debacle, when

[...] Lake contended that the majority's preference for muddling through was unacceptable in the long run. Sooner or later the administration would have to make a decision. Lake believed that doing so after a careful review of the options and their consequences was better than reacting to the ebb and flow of daily events, as most of his colleagues seemed to prefer.⁶¹

In early spring 1995, therefore, Lake turned to his NSC staff⁶² to draft a report on how the US could work towards a resolution of the Bosnian war⁶³. They came up with a paper that proposed lifting the embargo and embarking on a limited effort to arm the Bosnian Muslims⁶⁴. It also argued that UNPROFOR was becoming an obstacle to any peace initiative, since support for the force by France and the United Kingdom prevented them from supporting more "convincing" military measures, namely air strikes. Madeleine Albright strongly supported the effort⁶⁵, and indeed wrote a memo that helped bring Clinton around to the view that a Bosnia policy could work if it were well orchestrated⁶⁶. The options developed by the NSC staff clashed, however, with the preferences of both the State⁶⁷ and Defense Departments. Foggy Bottom wanted to "keep the UN in" at almost any cost, including deferring to the allies' wishes to avoid strategic bombardment. Defense balked at the plan, which would have honoured the administration's half-hearted promises of 1993 and 1994 to commit troops to relieve UNPROFOR⁶⁸.

This was a critical juncture:

Given the State and Defense Departments' position on the issue, Anthony Lake faced a critical choice. He could accept that there was no consensus for anything beyond continuing a policy of muddling through, or he could forge a new strategy and get the president to support a concerted effort seriously to tackle the Bosnia issue once and for all. Having for over two years accepted the need for consensus as the basis of policy and, as a consequence, failed to move the ball forward, Lake now decided that the time had come to forge his own policy initiative.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 88.

⁶² According to Daalder, two aides, Sandy Vershbow and Nelson Drew, were given the lead roles on the project. See "Decision to Intervene", (p. 3), and *Getting to Dayton*, p. 88-89.

⁶³ Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁶⁴ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 89.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92-93. Halberstam contends that this was the first time that Lake really worked in "close alliance" with Madeleine Albright. See *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁶⁶ *Idem*; see also Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁶⁷ On the diverging views of the staffs of the NSC and the State Department, see Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

⁶⁸ Daalder, "Decision to Intervene", (p. 4).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, (p. 4-5).

Lake took matters into his own hands, abandoning the role of “honest broker”⁷⁰ which he had played since he was appointed NSA in 1993. He became a “policy entrepreneur”. He used his access to the President to organize a meeting with the Chief Executive and select members of the Principals Committee on the Bosnian problem on June 2. Warren Christopher, who had been one of the loudest voices against the strategy, was simply not invited⁷¹. Clinton, who had already started showing concern with the policy-making quagmire⁷², encouraged Lake to pursue his quest for an effective solution⁷³.

On June 24 1995, Lake held a four-hour meeting with his NSC Bosnia advisors⁷⁴, during which the basic principles of an “endgame strategy” were worked out⁷⁵. Vershbow was tasked with drafting a formal paper⁷⁶. Meanwhile, Lake made sure he had Clinton’s support; he ran some of the ideas raised on June 24 past the President, who showed interest and again gave Lake encouragement⁷⁷.

The final discussions leading to the decision to intervene in Bosnia took place from mid-July to early August 1995. Daalder reports that Lake kept Clinton informed of progress on the drafting of his endgame strategy paper throughout the first half of July and, when it was completed, gave Clinton a copy before anyone else outside the NSC⁷⁸. On July 14, Clinton nevertheless became enraged over the Allies deep divisions over Bosnia and his own team’s inability to devise a working policy⁷⁹, especially as the news coming from Srebrenica showed the extent of the destruction wrought on the region and as reports of the massacre of the male population were being widely disseminated. On July 17, Lake held an informal meeting with Perry, Albright, Shalikashvili and Berger in his office. There, he laid out the particulars of his endgame strategy. Albright was

⁷⁰ Samantha Power describes Lake’s role thus: “Although he chaired a lot of meetings and generated a dense paper trail, he coordinated more than he led. [...] Lake personally favored intervention [in Bosnia], but did not recommend it to the president because he could not get consensus within the cabinet.”; see *op. cit.*, p. 316.

⁷¹ Drew, *Showdown*, p. 247; Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁷² See Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 307.

⁷³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 91, 93.

⁷⁴ Sandy Berger (Deputy National Security Advisor), Sandy Vershbow (Senior Director for European Affairs), Nelson Drew (Director of European Affairs), and Lake’s executive assistant Peter Bass. See Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 94.

⁷⁵ Daalder discusses the endgame strategy in detail in “Decision to Intervene”, (p. 5), and *Getting to Dayton*, p. 94-95. Briefly, the strategy called for NATO to replace the UN in peacekeeping operations, and threatened both the Serbs and Muslims with negative consequences (air strikes against the Serbs, a cut-off of support for the Croats and Muslims) if they made no effort to find a political solution to the conflict. It also entailed a show of military force and sustained diplomatic engagement by the United States to accomplish these goals, whether the allies agreed or not.

⁷⁶ Daalder, “Decision to intervene”, (p. 5).

⁷⁷ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 95; Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁷⁸ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 98.

⁷⁹ Later known by the White House staff as the “Putting Green Day”, Clinton’s rage that evening is related by Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 316-317.

supportive, while Perry and Shalikashvili were less than enthusiastic⁸⁰. Lake had arranged for Clinton to “drop by” during the meeting, which the President did towards the end. Clinton took the opportunity to state his deep dissatisfaction with the paralysis of policy on Bosnia, and pressed those present for “new ideas” to get the US out of the rut⁸¹. On July 18, it was Vice President Al Gore’s turn to press for a breakthrough on Bosnia. During that meeting of the Principals, Clinton hinted that the United States should consider using airpower⁸².

The meeting of July 17 led to the creation of an interagency group, chaired by Lake’s deputy Sandy Berger, that was asked to come up with “real policy options” for the President⁸³. During this process, which took about two weeks, it remained clear that neither the Department of State nor Defense would give the endgame strategy their full-fledged support. Things came to a head in early August. Warren Christopher was unable to attend a meeting between the President, the Vice President, and the Principals scheduled for August 7. He phoned the President, stressing that the endgame strategy was not the best option available to the US. Lake was aware of the call and used his access to Clinton to try to tilt the balance back in favor of his policy. Before the Principals’ meeting began, he talked privately with Clinton, emphasizing both the importance of presidential leadership, if a decision was to be made, and the merits of his preferred option⁸⁴. This seems to have produced the desired results. On August 8, the President declared, at another meeting of the Principals, that he thought the endgame strategy was the way for the US to go⁸⁵. On August 9, it became the administration’s policy⁸⁶. Now that a comprehensive strategy had been decided upon⁸⁷, Lake and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Peter Tarnoff were sent to Europe to “sell” it to the allies⁸⁸, a mission which proved successful⁸⁹.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100-101.

⁸¹ Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 261; Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 330-331.

⁸³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 102.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

⁸⁵ Although she does not single out any precise date, it was at that meeting that Clinton declared “I agree with Tony [Lake] and Madeleine [Albright], [...] we should bust our ass to get a settlement within the next few months. We must commit to a unified Bosnia. And if we can’t get that at the bargaining table, we have to help the Bosnians on the battlefield.”; quoted in Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁸⁶ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 111.

⁸⁷ To be sure, there was nothing in the endgame strategy that guaranteed it would be more successful than its forerunners. It was basically a resurrection of “lift and strike”, with the added threat of unilateral action by the US if the allies did not agree to the plan and a more pragmatic, less moralistic approach to achieving a political solution: any party that accepted the plan would be rewarded, and any party that resisted it would face negative consequences. The success of the strategy indicated to the Clinton administration that the US could achieve better results by exercising political leadership and backing it up by force.

⁸⁸ They were accompanied by Vershbow, Bass, Robert C. Frasure (Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs), Lieutenant General Wesley Clark (JCS), and Joseph Kruzal (Office of the Secretary of Defense). See Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 112.

Meanwhile, a negotiating team was assembled around Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs Richard Holbrooke⁸⁹. Everything fell into place, diplomatically and militarily, when the Serbs shelled the Sarajevo market on August 28, prompting an almost instantaneous military response by NATO. As Holbrooke contends:

The August 28 mortar attack was hardly the first challenge to Western policy, nor the worst incident of the war; it was only the latest. But it was different because of its timing: coming immediately after the launching of our diplomatic shuttle and the tragedy of Igman⁹¹, it appeared not only as an act of terror against innocent people in Sarajevo, but as the first direct affront to the United States.⁹²

The legacy of August 1995

As we have seen, external, political and electoral considerations were indeed important dimensions of the decision making process, but not the key factors in the development of a winning US strategy in Bosnia. It is true that by mid-1995 Clinton and his team were troubled by the progress of the war in the Balkans, that Clinton viewed Bosnia as a potential liability in 1996, and that the foreign policy team did not appreciate the Congressional attempt to take the lead in policy-making. But these considerations would not have moved the US in a new direction had Clinton not become more involved in the policy-making process⁹³, and had the NSC system⁹⁴ under Lake not emerged as the administration's main policy-development instrument. This helps explain why, in mid-1995, Bosnia became the first in a series of foreign policy successes for the Clinton administration, rather than a never-to-be-repeated anomaly. The triumph of the NSC system over the departments, and Clinton's realization that this way of operating yielded positive results, constituted a turning point. Anthony Lake (and later Sandy Berger, when he was appointed NSA in 1997) and the NSC staff had

⁸⁹ Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 73, and Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 190. Holbrooke points out that by sending his NSA, Clinton probably wanted to convey the seriousness of the endgame strategy to the Allies, as "[...] the real, and perhaps last, American push for peace"; see *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁹⁰ This team would be composed of Holbrooke, Wesley Clark, Robert Owen (a lawyer, who was a consultant for the State Department—not to be confused with David Owen, who had been the EU mediator of the Vance-Owen Plan for peace in Bosnia negotiated in 1992), Christopher Hill (State Department), Brigadier General Don Kerrick (NSC), James Pardew (Office of the Secretary of Defense), and Rosemarie Pauli. For details on the formation of this team at the State Department, see Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 79-83. For details on the selection of Holbrooke as main negotiator for the United States, see Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, p. 115, and Woodward, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

⁹¹ On August 19, the light armored vehicle shuttling Frasure, Kruzal and Drew plunged into a ravine near the town of Igman in Bosnia, killing all three diplomats. See Christiane Amanpour, "Frasure's Loss Is a Tragic One", 19 August 1995, available on CNN's website at <http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/Bosnia/updates/august95/8-19/> (page consulted on April 14, 2004).

⁹² Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁹³ This view is explicitly conveyed by Richard Holbrooke, *op. cit.*, p. 81-82.

⁹⁴ As opposed to the NSC *per se*, which was ignored by Clinton. It met only once during his eight years at the White House, on March 2, 1993.

the full support of the President in formulating policy. With more effective organization, leadership and support, the NSC system could finally operate as it was intended to.

The systemic changes in the months preceding the American military intervention in Bosnia would go beyond the immediate issue of peace in the Balkans. The collegial approach to problem-solving⁹⁵ that Clinton had favored from his inauguration in 1993 could work only if the President showed sustained interest in foreign matters and an ongoing engagement in policy debates. For the various reasons explained in this paper, Clinton finally began to do so in mid-1995. He would not regret it. With a functioning NSC system, he would more easily achieve an effective foreign policy that yielded results abroad and enhanced his stature at home.

⁹⁵ See Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1980, especially chapter 12, "The Collegial Policymaking Group", p. 209-216.

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