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Western Amateurs in the Balkans and the End of History

The Balkans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have attracted Western amateurs of great variety. Some offered their life-long devotion to the subjects of their affection, as did Edith Durham to the Albanians (*High Albania*, 1909), or Rebecca West to the Serbs (*Black Lamb and the Grey Falcon. A Journey Through Yugoslavia*, 1941). Others unleashed creatures of darkness in the Balkan habitat as did Bram Stoker with his famous *Dracula* and Eric Ambler with *The Mask of Dimitrios*. Another category of amateurs made headway in an unsuspecting readership with much sound and fury disguised as history. Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* even penetrated the inner sanctum of the White House.¹

The case of the Princeton-based scholar of antiquity Eugene Borza is more complicated. In his own Balkan past he partook in the local sport of appropriating the past or denying it to one's ethnic rivals. His brief excursion into modern history is both sly and innocent. Sly in intent but innocent of the modern terrain. Borza was "stunned" (p. 251) by the discovery of a gravestone in the Baldwin cemetery of Steelton Pennsylvania, describing its inhabitant as a "Macedon". This he concluded was evidence of ethno-genesis. Had he visited other immigrant communities in the northwestern United States he would have discovered a plethora of Macedonian (Greek, Bulgarian or Albanian), Peloponnesian, Cretan etc, appellations signifying local, rather than ethnic origin. Such designations of clubs, newspapers and tombstones since the early twentieth century abound throughout the habitat of immigrants with a strong attachment to their locale of origin.²

¹ For more examples, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 1997) and Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania. The Imperialism of the Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1998).

² Eugene N. Borza, "Macedonia Redux", in Frances B. Titchener and Richard F. Moor-ton, Jr, *The Eye Expanded* (University of California Press, 1999), 249-266.

Former US Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbot's article "Self-Determination in an Interdependent World"³ is indicative of how one's foreign policy can lead to unexpected developments when the diagnosis of the ailment is based on questionable premises. Mr. Talbot's attempt "to apply the concept of self-determination in a way that is conducive to integration and not to disintegration" succeeded in producing the opposite outcome. Even after the events of 1999, he believes that his administration is trying "to remake the politics of the region without, this time, having to redraw the map, without splitting up large, repressive, or failed states into small, fractious ministates that are neither economically nor politically viable". A quick look at the Western Balkans confirms Mr. Talbot's worst fears.⁴ His view of Bosnia is that this country has tried to "give all citizens reason to feel that they belong to a single state – not so much a nation state, as a multiethnic federal state. There is reason for cautious optimism about reaching this goal".⁵ Yet Bosnia remains as segregated as ever. On Kosovo he insists that "the Kosovars have historically wanted – and under Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito enjoyed – a high degree of autonomy. Then, under President Slobodan Milošević, they suffered a decade of Serbian oppression and more than a year of ethnic cleansing. Now they want more than just self-determination: They want total independence".⁶ However, the history of the Albanian Kosovars since they found themselves unwillingly in the Kingdom of Serbia (1913) does not conform with Mr. Talbot's view that their option for independence is the exclusive outcome of Milošević's repression.

The fact that the unification of Kosovo with Albania during the Second World War was well received by the Albanian population and the subsequent uprisings of the Albanian element against Tito's arrangements, defy Mr. Talbot's interpretation. His assessment that autonomy is still an option for the Kosovars "within a larger democratic, federalized, multiethnic state",⁷ if Serbia becomes democratic, is wide off the mark. A democratic regime could have materialized in Serbia if the Kosovar Albanians had chosen to throw their full electoral weight against Milošević in past and recent elections. They chose to abstain, to avoid legitimizing a state they did not want to be part of. Some, according to rumours, even secretly voted for Milošević to precipitate the breakdown that would lead to their independence.

Mr. Talbot's line is shared by many Western commentators. Most refuse to come to terms with a reality of warring ethnic nationalisms that

³ *Foreign Policy* (Spring 2000), 152-163.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*

resist reconciliation through democratic symbiosis. When, for example, this author put the question to George Soros whether a democratic Serbia would induce the Kosovars to return to the fold of FRY as an autonomous entity or a Republic, he did not get a clear answer. Western officials pay lip-service to the goal of acculturating multiethnic states to the ways of the free market economy and multicultural existence without explaining how this will come to pass. According to former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, "If the world is to support the idea of multiethnicity as an organising principle for states ... then it will have to do more to ensure the protection of minorities within multiethnic states."⁸ Yet five years after Dayton, Bosnia is more of a segregated, aid-dependent protectorate than ever.

Mr. Talbot's unhistorical mantra is repeated by the authors of *Winning Ugly*.⁹ "The fact that Kosovo's Albanians are now effectively in charge of the province – and that they should remain in control of at least most of it, whether through autonomy within Serbia, republic status within Yugoslavia, or eventual independence – has nothing to do with original claims to the land. It has instead to do with the treatment of the Kosovar Albanians by Slobodan Milosevic and his fellow Serb nationalists in recent times." The overlapping and conflicting irredentisms of Serbs and Albanians have everything to do with the present state of affairs in Kosovo. To say that latter-day nationalists in Serbia bear the sole responsibility for current developments is like saying that the Franco-German rivalry was invented by Hitler.

A brief review of Balkan developments may be necessary to place this author's premises in perspective.

The Balkans¹⁰ have never constituted a regional continuum, except during the centuries of Ottoman rule that gave them their name. In ethnic and cultural terms they have been as diversified as any geographic region of Europe be it Western, Northern, Southern or Central. In ethnic and linguistic terms, Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia are similar, while FYROM and Bulgaria share linguistic and cultural legacies. Although Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and FYROM have Christian Orthodox majorities, this has not prevented them from fighting on opposite camps. The Muslim element in Bosnia, Albania, Serbia and FYROM have not cooperated in the past, except as ethnic Albanians. Having remained outside Europe's mainstream

⁸ Warren Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 239.

⁹ Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly. NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 8.

¹⁰ The term here includes Yugoslavia (and its successor states), Albania, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria.

for centuries, Balkan societies failed to synchronize their development with the state-building process of Western Europe.

The disparate record of emerging Balkan states in attaining independence throughout the nineteenth and even as late as the twentieth century and their intermittent efforts at constructing administrative and parliamentary institutions, were never free of European politics. Their irredentist wars against Ottoman rule and the resultant borders were closely supervised by foreign patrons and regulated by the principles that governed European relations. If the First World War restructured the boundaries of the Balkans and afforded a period of relative freedom from great power involvement, the communist era that followed the Second World War imposed Soviet influence and impeded Balkan development along Western lines.

The process of Yugoslavia's disintegration began a decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall when the need for economic and administrative reform came at odds with long standing trends of the Federation's decentralization. Yugoslavia's access to Western capital markets throughout the sixties and seventies, and its inability to service its Western debts after the second oil shock, confronted the Federal leadership with a dire predicament. The measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) required constitutional reform to strengthen the central Government's ability to implement an austerity policy. In 1983 the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) leadership appointed a party commission to discuss the political system. The Commission's preliminary proposals for amendments to the 1974 Constitution soon entered public debate which revealed the anti-federalist sentiments of the more prosperous Republics. Furthermore the pressure of the West, favoured less, rather than more, government interference in the economy, free-market reform and privatization. In other words, Yugoslavia was getting mixed messages from its Western creditors and its Western political friends to increase and to reduce central authority at the same time.¹¹ Those Republics whose views on this matter seemed more liberal and Western were in fact catering to the interests of the ethnic groups they represented. They were of course the first to bolt the Federation.¹²

Of the states and institutions outside the region of Southeastern Europe, the European Union initially wielded the greatest influence. From its early support for the unity of Yugoslavia as a precondition for future

¹¹ Susan Woodward's analysis, among the many that attempted to trace the causes of Yugoslavia's implosion, is perhaps the most observant of the Federation's history. *Balkan Tragedy. Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 4-5, 17, 50, 60-62.

¹² *Ibid.*

application to the Brussels EPS meeting of the twelve Foreign Ministers on 16–17 December 1991, the EU performed an about face. Within “half a year the EC had moved from a unified position on the maintenance of the Yugoslav state, to a common but harshly discordant policy on inviting those republics seeking independence to submit applications and undergo the procedure identified.”¹³ This decision was prompted by Germany’s insistence on the immediate recognition of Slovenia and Croatia which initiated a trend that could not be confined to the two Republics.

Washington at first supported Serbian reluctance to abandon Yugoslav unity. However, in his July 1991 visit to Yugoslavia, Secretary of State James Baker stated that his government would not object to a peaceful process leading to independence, however unlikely that was. By the Spring of 1992, the US had cast its lot for the recognition of the Republics.

Politicians and diplomats, well-versed in regional politics and irredentist strife, warned the EU of the violence that a break-up of Yugoslavia would unleash. Their prediction was that recognition of secessionist unitary states, in which preponderant ethnic forces held sway over their own minorities, would provoke a chain reaction until, eventually, the process of disintegration led to a plethora of ethnically pure but unworkable neighbourhood entities. In a conference on Balkan developments, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center and the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft in Potsdam (23–26 June 1992), this author expressed his own worries over the future of the region:

The most ominous development in Yugoslavia is the proliferation of weak and mutually hostile state entities in a region, which does not at the present moment constitute a high priority for the West. In that sense the Balkans are no longer the powder keg of Europe but a decaying backwater cut off from the prospect of communication with the Western Community. The implosion of nationalist strife of Yugoslavia can still create a chain reaction of developments that would undermine the economies of adjacent states and determine the future of the Balkans as the third world of Europe.¹⁴

Since 1991, the adjacent states have lost valuable trade and, as a result, smuggling and corruption have prevailed in a sizeable black market economy. Furthermore they were cut off from the rest of Europe, as a result of embargoes and political decisions that directly affected their capacity for growth.

¹³ James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will. International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (London: Hurst, 1997), 63–64.

¹⁴ T. Veremis, “Eine Neudefinition der Sicherheitsbeange in Südosteuropa”, *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 2/33 (1993), 141.

The 1995 bombings by NATO put an end to Serbian advance in Bosnia. The Dayton Agreement of 21 November 1995 that followed was engineered by a superpower whose timing was perfect. In the summer that preceded the bombings, the Croatian forces evicted the Serbs from Krajina, while the Serbs cleansed most of Eastern Bosnia. The contours of an ethnically segregated Bosnia were officially settled on paper. The American success in pacifying the region may have been partly a question of good timing but it also signified the failure of the EU to produce and enforce a viable solution.

The Dayton achievement in freezing the Bosnian conflict made Bosnia-Herzegovina totally dependent on the West. Even the development of its democratic institutions is supervised by outside forces and some of its elected leaders are sacked when they fail to meet Western standards. The three ethnically cleansed sectors of the state, however, continue their separate lives without promoting the multicultural coexistence which became the hallmark of Western intervention.

For Americans the role of arbiter in Western Balkan affairs has been a novel experience. With an administration that considers the region an embarrassment rather than a strategic asset, the US has since tried to apply its panacea of free market and democratic institutions with little patience. So we are now beginning to realize that such institutions take time to develop and that therefore a premature withdrawal of the SFOR or the KFOR could cause havoc to recur.

Serbia's superior command of firepower had been its greatest weakness in the depiction of the Yugoslav conflict by the Western media. Having committed the largest percentage of atrocities among the belligerents, she steadily became the main target of CNN and US attention. As a result, there was a marked change in Western policy favouring the adversaries of Serbia as the weaker parts in the conflict. Naturally, the Kosovo Albanians were the weakest of all the victims.

Was it only a question of principles that led to military involvement in Bosnia, or did this also serve special interests of the EU and the USA? The report of the *International Commission on the Balkans*, in one of its more candid moments, explains why "the fate of Islam in Bosnia is of importance for reasons going beyond the country or even the Balkans: 1) it has become a factor in the West's relations with the Islamic world; 2) it might become important for Turkey's relationship with Europe; and 3) it has implications for the Islamic communities of Western Europe".¹⁵ There is no mention in the report as to why the Serbs should consider the West's relations with the

¹⁵ *Unfinished Peace*, Report of the International Commission on the Balkans (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for Peace and Aspen Institute, 1996), 18.

Islamic world their own priority. If there had been, the Serbs could have been gently ushered into a communality of interests with a European community that they aspired to join.

Western policy vis-à-vis Kosovo was prompted by the Bosnian precedent, and the Dayton Accord. Unlike Bosnia, however, Kosovo has been a province of Serbia since the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 and a territory replete with Serbian history and religious shrines. Whereas Dayton confirmed a fait accompli in the field, Kosovo had remained under firm Serb administration, until the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) began to challenge the authority of Belgrade. Apparently the goal of the UCK was to provoke the Serb authorities into violent reprisals that would capture the attention of the West and compel it to act. In the cat-and-mouse game that ensued between the Serb forces and the UCK, an outside intervention could only keep them apart by committing ground troops of the SFOR type.

Mr. Holbrooke's agreement with Milošević in October 1998 for a partial Serb withdrawal from Kosovo failed to address the absence of ground troops that could have prevented the UCK from filling the vacuum in the field. Although Milosevic was adverse to the presence of foreign troops in what he considered to be Serbian sovereign territory, at the same time he was compelled by UCK action to launch large-scale operations that compromised Serbia internationally. Before the West came to Rambouillet, the possibility of committing an SFOR type of contingency to supervise the October 1998 agreement had not been exhausted. The participation of Russians in a force that would have ensured the orderly departure of large numbers of Serb troops and the passivity of the UCK, might have been possible if the Americans had not persisted in excluding the Russians. The Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement brought back displaced Albanians to their homes, but the absence of an enforcement mechanism exposed the agreement to contraventions by the adversaries. An accurate picture of the excesses committed between October 1998 and March 1999 when the bombing began, is probably included in the report of the 1,300 OSCE observers in Kosovo. The Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia James Bissett¹⁶ noted that this valuable piece of evidence, which has so far escaped the attention of commentators, has not been given to the public by the OSCE.¹⁷ Regardless of whether the report is damning to Serb operations, or not, the Rambouillet ultimatum was seen by Milošević as a violation of his country's territorial integrity. NATO's demand to be granted access to the entire FRY

¹⁶ In the Canadian *Globe and Mail*, 10 January 2000.

¹⁷ Neither Tim Judah, *Kosovo-War and Revenge* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), nor Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, mention this lacuna.

gave the then Federal President the opportunity to present his refusal as an act of resistance against foreign occupation.¹⁸

If actions are not to be judged by intentions but by outcomes, then the operation of bombing the FRY was a mistake. NATO devastated a centrally located Balkan state in order to rid its people of Milošević, to save the imperilled Kosovar Albanians and to secure multiethnic coexistence in an autonomous province. However, it succeeded in achieving the opposite on all counts. After Bosnia, Kosovo is (or will soon be) yet another ethnically cleansed protectorate of the West with a Liberation Army (UCK) that has declared its irredentist designs against the neighbouring states.¹⁹ In the ethnic antagonisms over territory, NATO has clearly taken sides²⁰ and the US agenda for a multiethnic, multicultural Western Balkans has failed.

Of all the commentators of US policy in Kosovo, Henry Kissinger is the great exception that verifies the rule. His Hobbesian view of human nature, his historical erudition and his careful computation of national interest, make him perhaps the most accomplished of the anti-Lockean mavericks of American officialdom. With a series of articles (April 15, May 31 and June 21, 1999) Kissinger strove to salvage European history from the administration's onslaught. In the grand tradition of nineteenth-century conservative statesmen that he admires, he is wary of humanitarian causes with unpredictable outcomes. His criticism of Mrs. Albright's achievement in Kosovo and his remedy to the present impasse certainly challenge mainstream views on the subject, "If we try to implement the UN resolution for any length of time, we will emerge as the permanent party to arcane and bitter Balkan quarrels. It would be far wiser to cut the Gordian knot and concede Kosovar independence as part of an overall Balkan settlement – perhaps including self-determination for each of the three ethnic groups of Bosnia. In such an arrangement, the borders of Kosovo and its neighbours should be guaranteed by NATO or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. As in Bosnia, the international forces would then patrol both sides of these borders for at least a substantial interim period."²¹ Kissinger's admonitions do not sound hollow. By intervening, the US has made its presence a determining factor in shaping the future of the region. The Western Balkans have therefore become again a great power's protec-

¹⁸ The accounts of the Rambouillet deliberations, especially that of Judah, leave little to be desired. Judah, *Kosovo-War*, 197–226; Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, 84–90.

¹⁹ Chris Hedges, "As UN Organizes, Rebels are Taking Charge of Kosovo", *The New York Times*, 29 July 1999.

²⁰ See view of Deputy Commander in Chief of US European Command, Charles G. Boyd, "Making Peace with the Guilty", *Foreign Affairs* (Sept/Oct 1995), 22–38.

²¹ Henry Kissinger, "As the Cheers Fade", *Newsweek*, 21 June 1999.

torate, as they have been so often in the past. The paradox in this exceptional Western involvement in an ever growing number of protectorates (Bosnia, Kosovo, FYROM, Albania) is that unlike the Cold War period, the region does not constitute a US, NATO or EU priority, but is more of an exporter of immigrants and a generator of trouble for the rest of Europe. Given the scarcity of Western resources allocated for the reconstruction of the region, the Yugoslav black hole may become the cause of a wider contagion of economic decay.²²

The miraculous change of regime in the FRY following the September 2000 elections has become the single most heartening development in the Western Balkans for a very long time.

A permanent slide into barbarism is not among the likely contingencies that threaten the Western Balkans. Such strife as we have seen throughout the Kosovo crisis will recede. We should also not forget that nation states in most European cases have been unicultural institutions promoting their own exclusivity at the expense of the “others”. It was the immense, material and moral devastation of WWII, as well as the Soviet threat, that induced the Europeans to take up the experiment of multilateralism and multiculturalism in the post-war period. The Balkans as an appendage of Western Europe adopted the state-building process and the ideological trappings of its Western prototype with some delay. The dissolution of Yugoslavia revealed the other side of irredentism – ethnic cleansing. If a state cannot expand its territory, it can certainly cleanse it from its undesirable ethnic minorities, especially if they are perceived as a security threat.

The US did not intervene in Bosnia and Kosovo to facilitate ethnically pure microprotectorates, but multicultural democratic federations, after its own image. The Americans are dedicated to multiculturalism although they remain a multiethnic society with a single political culture. Their virtuous undertaking in the Western Balkans foundered in this misconception and in the structural American contempt for history. When the founding fathers turned their backs to the English throne, centuries of convoluted history froze and the future was illuminated by the manifest destiny of the new nation. The end of history happened in the eighteenth century for the Americans; they expected it to occur at the end of the twentieth century for the rest of the world.

What can the West do to prevent the regional rift from widening?

1) Qualify economic aid and channel it to the restoration of the infrastructure. (The Marshall plan after all was about development not financing

²² Martin Sletzinger, “The Consequences of the War in Kosovo”, in *Kosovo & NATO. Impending Challenges* (Washington DC: The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, East European Studies, 1999), 3-5.

Western advisers and NGOs.) 2) Stop believing that Democracy can be transplanted on fallow ground. 3) Encourage regional and local cooperation initiatives as an ante-chamber to future EU accession. 4) Keep a Western military presence in Bosnia and Kosovo to maintain order and help the locals restore a stable and predictable state of affairs. The UNMIK should gradually give way to local authorities. 5) If Serbia remains the economic black hole it is today, its population will continue to leave a land that can no longer support them. 6) Western and especially American policy-makers should become more reverential of history. Its end is nowhere in sight.

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