

TIME TO RECOGNIZE CROATIAN AND SLOVENIAN INDEPENDENCE

(Updating *Background* No. 820, "An American Response to the Balkan Revolutions," March 29, 1991.)

The Bush Administration is making the same mistakes in dealing with the disintegration of Communism in Yugoslavia that it earlier made in the Soviet Union. In pursuit of an undefined "stability," the Administration in effect has helped to prop up the crumbling Communist center and contributed to a major war in central Europe, while ignoring the pleas of beleaguered democratic reformers in the provinces who are best equipped to push through long-overdue political and economic reforms. In the case of Yugoslavia, the Administration's hands-off policy is even more puzzling because the democratic leaders of the independence-minded Yugoslav republics of Croatia and Slovenia have been mired in a bloody five-month-old war with the Communist government of Serbia, the largest republic in Yugoslavia.

George Bush no longer can afford to balk at supporting the new republics of Croatia and Slovenia, which are part of the emerging European state system. The Bush Administration now must recognize that power and legitimacy have shifted to the republics from the Serb-dominated central government of Yugoslavia, just as they have shifted to the republics inside the Soviet Union. The Croats and Slovenes are attempting to exercise the same right to national self-determination that the three Baltic states already have attained. Yet the United States has not supported their struggle or done anything to prevent their slaughter at the hands of the Serbian Communists who have usurped the powers of the Yugoslav federal government.

Immediately following Croatia's declaration of independence on June 25, Serbian guerrillas backed by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav army staged an uprising and now control about one-third of Croatian territory. The Serbs launched the insurgency inside Croatia ostensibly to safeguard the human rights of the 600,000 Serbs who make up about 12 percent of Croatia's 4.5 million population. But repeated air and artillery bombardments of Croatian cities that have killed hundreds of civilians have made it clear that Serbia's Communist regime is determined to expand its control over territory through a war of terror and intimidation, not protect the lives of Croatia's ethnic Serbs. Since June an estimated 10,000 people have been killed, most of them Croats, and over 500,000 refugees have fled the fighting.

Stoking Nationalist Fires. Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic has stoked the fires of Serbian nationalism and engineered the war with Croatia apparently to retain his grip on power. His exploitation of Serbo-Croatian tensions has inflated his popularity and consolidated his political power. He charged that Croatia was planning a "genocide" of ethnic Serbs, cynically inflaming Serbian memories of the massacres committed by the puppet regime installed in Croatia by German Nazis during World War II. Milosevic's political survival depends on his ability to distract Serbs from growing unemployment and festering economic problems created by the bankrupt socialist economic system that he helped to impose on Yugoslavia.

Although the Bush Administration has condemned the Serbo-Croatian bloodshed, it has sought to avoid taking sides and has not condemned the aggressor. When Bush announced on November 9 that the U.S. would impose economic sanctions on all Yugoslav republics in an attempt to force an end to the fighting, he blamed "nationalism" for the fighting without specifying which nationalism: "We see in Yugoslavia how the proud name of nationalism can splinter a country into a bloody civil war." Bush's complaint about nationalism seems merely an excuse for inaction. The U.S. policy of evenhandedness implies a moral equivalence between the long-suppressed nationalism of newly democratic Croatia and the expansionism of Communist-dominated Serbia. This false equivalence only encourages Serbian aggression and prolongs the fighting.

Green Light to Aggression. In fact, by failing to support Croatian and Slovenian national self-determination, the U.S. gave the green light to Serbian aggression. Secretary of State James Baker indicated on June 21 during a visit to Belgrade that the U.S. would not recognize the independence of Croatia or Slovenia if they seceded from Yugoslavia, saying that: "Instability and breakup of Yugoslavia, we think, could have some very tragic consequences, not only here but more broadly in Europe." Only six days later the Yugoslavian Army seized several border posts in Slovenia, prompted surely by Belgrade's belief that America was committed to the unity of Yugoslavia. Pre-occupied by the Middle East peace process, Baker seems unwilling or unable to admit that a war has broken out in Europe that merits U.S. attention.

The Administration appears committed to preserving some sort of Yugoslavian central authority. Milosevic's use of force to enlarge Serbia's boundaries violates the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes a provision that European borders may be altered only by peaceful means.

Margaret Thatcher urged in a September 23 speech at a Heritage Foundation gathering that: "We do not confuse stability with the diplomatic error of propping up whatever unstable *status quo* happens to be at hand. The conflict in Yugoslavia... [is a consequence] of Marxism and of attempting to crush, ignore, and override legitimate national feelings in pursuit of an artificial bureaucratic supranationalism with more roots and precious little freedom. True stability lies in creating looser structures of international cooperation in which legitimate nationalisms can both express themselves and forge links based on common interests."¹

Breakup Inevitable. Current U.S. policy fails to recognize the fact that Yugoslavia itself was an artificial 20th century creation that has been held together only by force since Josip Broz Tito's communist takeover in 1945. The breakup of this imposed structure and the drive for independence of its restive national republics is an inevitable and desirable process. Germany has accepted this reality and had pledged to recognize the independence of Slovenia and Croatia before Christmas. Germany, however, bowed to the December 17 European Community (EC) decision to postpone until January 15 recognition of Croatia and Slovenia as independent republics. The U.S. welcomed the EC decision, saying this would allow more time for the EC and the United Nations to work out a peaceful settlement. Twelve U.N. observers already have been dispatched to Yugoslavia to prepare for possible full-scale U.N. intervention.

Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden are likely to follow Germany's lead and recognize the independence of Croatia and Slovenia. Pope John Paul II also has weighed in by saying that the Croats have "legitimate aspirations." Yet U.S. officials have resisted recognizing Croatian and Slovenian independence because they fear that it would encourage other Yugoslav republics to press for independence and set a precedent for other secession-minded provinces in Europe. Yet this already is happening. But if the U.S. stands by while Serbia annexes territory of its weaker neighbors, then two much more dangerous precedents will be set: aggression will pay dividends and national frontiers will be altered through the use of force.

1 The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, OM, FRS, MP, "Unfinished Business, New Challenges," *Heritage Lecture* No. 340, September 23, 1991.

Bush admirably refused to accept these two dangerous precedents when he fought a war against Iraq earlier this year to liberate Kuwait. No one expects him to dispatch U.S. troops now to Yugoslavia; vital U.S. interests are not threatened there. But Bush cannot now simply turn his back on Croatia as it resists Serbian occupation. Allowing Croatia to be crushed would be a major setback for the spread of democracy to communist states and a long term threat to the equilibrium of the Balkans.

The U.S. must abandon its myopic efforts to preserve Yugoslavian central authority and should change its policy to favor the democratic republics of Croatia and Slovenia. Therefore, the U.S. should:

- 1) Recognize the independence of Croatia and Slovenia and open embassies in those nations.**
- 2) Declare Serbia to be the aggressor in the Balkan fighting and the main obstacle to peace.**
- 3) Call for Serbia to halt its bombardment of Croatian cities and lift its blockade of the Croatian coast.**
- 4) Lift economic sanctions against Croatia and Slovenia while retaining them on Serbia until a negotiated settlement is reached.**
- 5) Work with the European Community, which should continue to take the lead in trying to broker a negotiated settlement that will satisfy Croatia's demand for national self-determination within its present boundaries while safeguarding the human rights of the ethnic Serbian minority in Croatia.**

Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., Ph.D.
President

Dr. Feulner, President of the Heritage Foundation, has visited Yugoslavia frequently since 1965.

