

# Other Voices

*All you have to do, Jim, is straighten out the White House's foreign policy on the sly and above board. Campaign from disaster.*

## Peacemakers are no match for ancient

**T**HE headlines are full of unpronounceable Yugoslav names; the news is full of unspeakable Yugoslav atrocities, and Americans, startled to realize that our forces are closer to fighting a war in Europe than at any time since 1945, are asking three questions: Who are these people? Why do they hate each other so? What, if anything, should the United

States do? Unfortunately, none of these questions has simple answers.

**Walter  
Russell  
Mead**

Americans hate history and, considering how ugly so much of it is, who can say we are wrong? But there is no

way out: A history known to every schoolchild in the Yugoslav republics is driving the current crisis, and Americans who want to understand the situation are going to have to brush up.

It all begins, more or less, with the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, when the Turks crushed the Serbs, conquered the Balkans and inaugurated 500 years of repressive Ottoman rule. The Eastern Orthodox Serbs suffered the worst: forbidden to take part in politics; cut off from world trade; and taxed into poverty by a corrupt government. The Serbs shunned the cities — with their arrogant Turkish rulers and voracious tax gatherers — and kept embers of their culture alive in the farms and hills. Bands of robbers — Serbian Robin Hoods fighting Muslim Sheriffs of Nottingham — haunted the hills, while poets sang of vanished glories and keeping hope for a new day alive.

The Catholic Croats had a better time. Croatia enjoyed special privileges under the Ottoman Turks and, in 1699, much of present-day Croatia came under the control of the Catholic Hapsburgs. Although the Croats suffered some discrimination under the Hapsburg Empire, they were not rebels like the Serbs; when the Empire went to war with Serbia in World War I, Croatian regiments served loyally and well under Hapsburg commanders.

In Bosnia, Kosovo had still another impact. Many Bosnians were Christian "heretics," persecuted by Orthodox and Catholics alike. For them, Turkish rule was actually an improvement. Better still, those who converted to Islam were granted legal equality with the conquerors in the Ottoman Empire. Some Bosnians — especially the upper classes — took advantage of the opportunity. To the Orthodox Serbs hiding in the hills — and toiling as peasants for the Bosnian aristocracy — the Bosnian Mus-



lims seemed a combination of Judas Iscariot, Benedict Arnold, Imelda Marcos and the IRS. This resentment had 600 years to mature.

Both the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires collapsed at the end of World War I, giving the Southern Slavs their first chance since the Battle of Kosovo to settle their affairs without interference from powerful neighbors. Unfortunately, Turkish oppression, poverty and isolation had created a Serbian nationalism that was passionate and idealistic but incapable of dealing with the national feelings of others. While Serbs, Croats and Bosnian Muslims disagree heatedly on what happened next and why, this much is clear: Serbian heavy-handedness — aided and abetted by complementary pig-headedness among the neighbors — meant that the Yugoslavs hated each other more than ever once they were united in the same kingdom.

The chance for revenge came in World War II, and some — not all — Croats were quick to seize it. When the Nazis invaded

Yugoslavia in 1941, a handful of Croatian Fascists set up a puppet government in "Greater Croatia" intent on mass murders and forced conversions of Serbs. Historians estimate the murders in the range of 300,000; another couple of hundred thousand were "received" into the Roman Catholic Church thanks to persecution and threats.

Yugoslavs of all nationalities resisted the invaders, and the Germans — the forgetful Kurt Waldheim among them — responded with vicious and murderous reprisals. In October 1941, the Germans murdered 7,000 civilians — including schoolchildren — to retaliate for the deaths of 10 German soldiers.

In the postwar years, the ruling Yugoslav communists were officially hostile to all of Yugoslavia's national aspirations. After all, atheistic communists could not help but regard differences among Muslims and Christians as superstitious holdovers from the past, fated to wither away.

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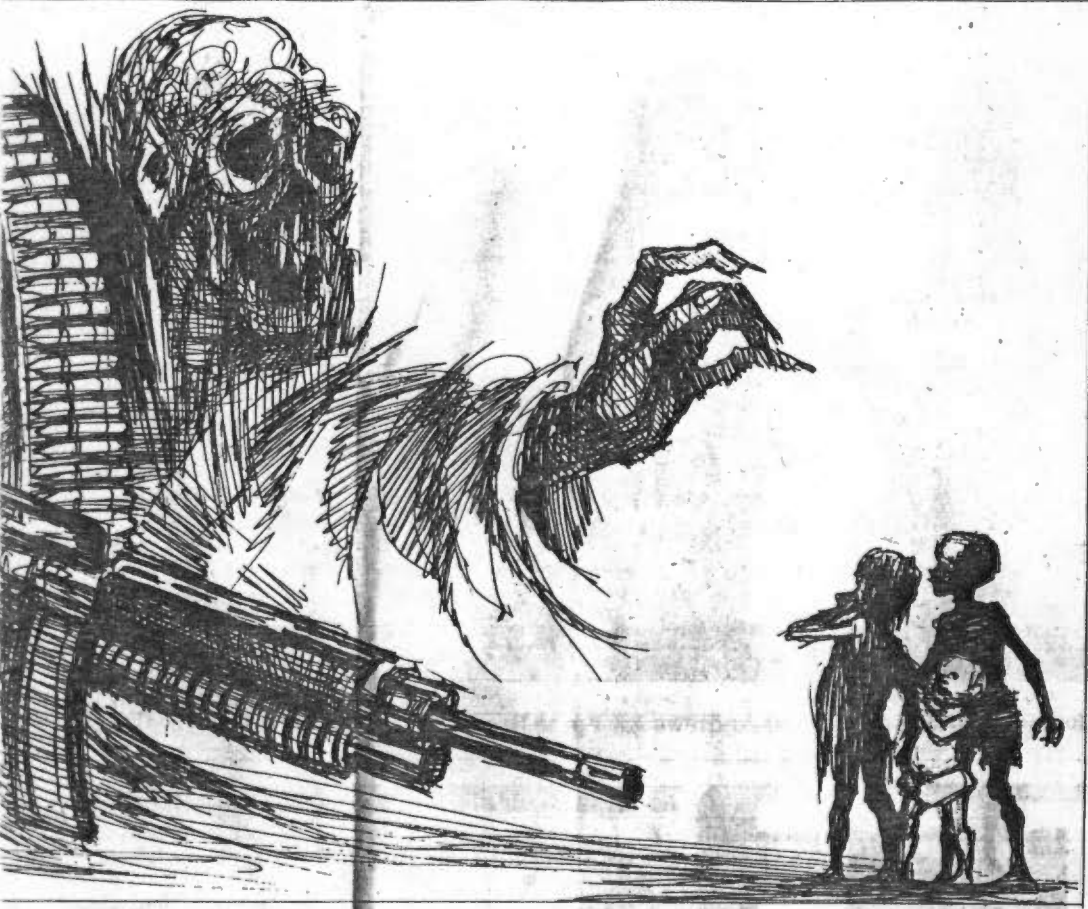
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Sandy Grady

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# no match for ancient Balkan hatred



Eleanor Mill

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treds and prejudices went underground. Serbs worked to dominate the state — especially the armed forces — and the other nationalities resisted. With the disintegration of the communist center, there was nothing — other than common sense and human decency — to hold Yugoslavia together, and the nationalities reverted to type: murdering parents and harassing the orphans.

This time it is the Serbs, not the Croats, who come off as the heavies, but the Serbs do have a point. There is nothing sacred about the boundaries of Croatia or, even more, Bosnia; and history justifies the Serbs' fears of oppression under the rule of their neighbors. Of course, it also justifies Croatian and Muslim fears of the Serbs, and the patterns of settlement are such that no boundaries can be drawn that will satisfy all of the groups.

Worse still, Balkan wars have a habit of spreading. The Albanians have some bones to pick with the Serbs, and Macedonia is a time bomb. Muslim countries, shocked by the atrocities in Bosnia, and stunned by the

West's apparent indifference, are talking about sending relief and possibly military aid to their embattled brethren. If war breaks out between the mostly Muslim Albanians and the Serbs, the pressures for Islamic intervention will grow.

So — now what? The debate is, basically, about three options. Option One is the rhetorical route: We deplore the aggression, we invoke human rights, we mail CARE packages to the orphans, we vote symbolic sanctions in the United Nations. Americans are good at all this, but it is obvious, even to us, that it doesn't add up to much. Option One exposes our hypocrisy to the Muslim world. The West stands idly by when Christians persecute Muslims; it also shows aggressors everywhere that all that talk in the Persian Gulf about the "new world order" was nothing but hot air.

Option Two is scarier: We don't just mail CARE packages; we provide a delivery service. Optimists think this can be accomplished with air power, but optimists are wrong. As generations of Serbian hill bandits knew, Bosnia is ideally suited for guerrilla warfare; narrow canyons, mountains and caves make hit-and-run raids against ground convoys easy. Option Two looks like the slow road to Vietnam: An unwinnable, open-ended ground war against entrenched guerrillas.

Option Three is intervention. It probably won't work. Adolf Hitler couldn't beat Serbian guerrillas; Josef Stalin couldn't bend them to his will. We aren't willing to be as brutal as Hitler, and we don't have as many economic and political sticks as Stalin. Our allies won't be much help. Germany, thanks to its own criminal past in the region, can't help us fight, and nobody else wants to. The hard truth is that the American people, however disturbed they are by the news from Yugoslavia, are not willing to fight — and they are possibly unable to win — a war in Yugoslavia.

Option One is a gesture, Two an illusion, Three a disaster. These conclusions aren't pretty, but they need to be drawn. Welcome to the new world disorder. We live in hard, ugly times when there are not only no easy answers, but sometimes no answers at all. The cycle of killing that started at Kosovo has a long way to run, and whether we stand aside or jump in, the killing is likely to go on and on and on.

Walter Russell Mead is the author of "Mortal Splendor: The American Empire in Transition." He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.