

WHAT ARE WE FIGHTING FOR?

David Hart argues that if we really must intervene in the Balkan conflict we should be backing the Serbs

BRITISH policy in the Balkans should be to do nothing. Such a view is unlikely to be popular with the chattering classes or with those ministers who are being, and will increasingly be, pressed, particularly by the new Clinton administration and the French, to join in some kind of military action against the Serbs.

But foreign policy strategists should be like property speculators. The more rigorously they approach their work, the more unpopular they become.

The first rule of foreign policy is that you must have a national policy. A national policy for the Balkans requires a view of Britain's vital interest in the region, if any, and an evolution of clear objectives that serve that interest.

Instead of a policy, the Foreign Office

has adopted a meandering approach illuminated sporadically by ministers' reactions, either to Ms Kate Adie and colleagues reporting from the front line, or to pressure from other western leaders.

There have been many mistakes. Perhaps the worst was to succumb to pressure from Herr Genscher, then German foreign minister, to recognise Bosnia when it was clearly not a viable nation-state.

The noisy western campaigning on behalf of Mr Panic in the recent elections was a mistake of more recent vintage. It contributed to Mr Slobodan Milosevic's victory and even gave some kind of democratic legitimacy to his policy of conquest in Bosnia.

Mr Douglas Hurd's latest *obita dicta* have not improved matters. In a much

reported phrase in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 30 December, he wrote that he could 'imagine armed action' against the Serbs. That less than unequivocal call was thoroughly muffled three days later when he warned in a New Year letter to diplomats that the British public and politicians were unprepared for the likely scale of British casualties if the Government bowed to the 'clamour to intervene militarily'. Cloudy words in London mean cloudy perceptions in Belgrade.

It is hard to believe that Britain's vital interests are affected by the religion or political outlook of the rulers of Bosnia, Serbia or any other part of what was Yugoslavia. Since the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, Yugoslavia is no longer a front-line state and so its strategic importance has diminished, if not disappeared. Our trade with Yugoslavia was insignificant and is now non-existent.

The argument that Britain should use military force to prevent beastliness is not persuasive unless it is likely directly to affect Britain or its vital interests. There are many other places where very beastly conflicts are taking place; for example, there are 25 in the territory of the former Soviet Union. The Burmese government has been particularly nasty to its people for many years.

Nor are the military options appealing, now that the Serbs and Croats have largely achieved their aims in Bosnia. Military conditions in the Balkans are not simple, as they were in both the Falklands and the

I WAS on duty at the prison over the Christmas holiday. The iron walkways and old Victorian brickwork were festooned with paper chains and bells of gold and silver foil. There was a Christmas tree on every wing, organ music emanated from the chapel and according to the menu book which I signed, certifying it fit for Home Office consumption, there was turkey and plum pudding for lunch. (Actually the food in prison is much better than in hospital.)

I was accompanied on my rounds by an old warder who told me that this, thank goodness, was his last Christmas on the inside. He was retiring after 45 years in uniform.

'I expect you've seen some changes in the service,' I said.

'Oh yes, sir,' he replied. 'Cons in them days didn't have no freedom, and they couldn't see a doctor until they was dying.'

We were both lamenting the now irrecoverably lost era of plain common sense when another warder approached us.

'Would you mind seeing a nonce for me, doctor?' he asked (a nonce is a sex offender). 'He says he can't keep no food down.'

If symptoms persist. . .

I went to the prisoner's cell. He looked angry rather than ill.

'Everythink goes straight through me,' he said, tracing the passage of food through his entrails with his finger. 'Even the potatoes.'

'How long have you been like this?' I asked.

'Ever since I come here,' he replied. 'You should see the food — I wouldn't give it to a dog.'

'Unfortunately, sir,' said the old warder as we continued our rounds, 'it's true that the nonces get the worst food, the leftovers like. It's the cons what distribute the meals, and they don't like the nonces. We do what we can to stop it, but it still goes on.'

Next I called on a remanded murderer who had refused his breakfast because he said he was innocent of the charge. It was one of those mundane and-the-next-thing-I-knew-doctor-she-was-dead sort of murders. In the good old days, of course, if a man refused his breakfast it

was his own affair; nowadays, a doctor is called immediately to pronounce on the matter.

My rounds over, I was on my way out of the prison when I received an urgent call from C Wing. Prisoner Smith, it seemed, had just been PP-nined; could I come at once?

Some of my readers, perhaps, will not be familiar with the verb *to PP-nine*, which may be used in either the active or passive mood, but only — so far as I am aware — in prison. It means to put a PP-9 battery in a sock and then hit someone with it.

I was told by one warder that in certain prisons such batteries are considered too valuable to be put to this use, and tins of mandarin oranges are substituted: hence the alternative expression to mandarin someone.

I need hardly add that the appearance of the prisoner who had been assaulted with a battery was dreadful to behold. He was in debt to the drug barons, it seemed, and this was intended as a warning to him to pay up or else.

A belated Merry Christmas to all our murderers!

Theodore Dalrymple

To: S. Halper
From Nick Tulcea

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Gulf. There, victory could be defined and with enough force and determination achieved. What would constitute victory in the Balkans?

Enforcing the no-fly zone over Bosnia, son of the no-fly zones in Iraq, is an empty political gesture without military significance. The Serbs are not flying and do not need to fly fixed-wing aircraft in anger. The few helicopters that they are flying are very difficult to destroy and their contribution to the Serb war effort is nugatory.

Creating a Muslim enclave would involve at least 100,000 ground troops, many aircraft and some ships. It would be an operation of uncertain duration and would undoubtedly lead to significant western casualties. It would also require reverse ethnic cleansing, with the Serbs as targets.

Protecting the Muslims in Kosovo, which is a part of Serbia, would involve an invasion of an internationally recognised state and is in any case most unlikely to receive UN blessing, not least because both the Russians and the Chinese are likely to oppose it.

Serbia could be bombed and there is little doubt that if western leaders had the will and were prepared to authorise the necessary targeting — which would have to include the Serbian military and civilian infrastructure and political and military leadership — Serbia could be cowed. But it would not halt the conflict in Bosnia. Indeed, by weakening the Serbs it could easily encourage the Muslims and the Croats to greater efforts to recapture lost or new ground.

Macedonia, not internationally recognised so far because of its historic associations with large tracts of northern Greece, could be protected by a suitable military force, UN-sponsored or otherwise, but colossal amounts of aid would have to follow the force, as Macedonia is close to both economic and political collapse.

There are, in fact, several respectable arguments that Britain's national interest would be best served, if we have to act at all, by helping the Serbs.

First, they are the only people capable of imposing some kind of stability in the area. Of a total former Yugoslav population of some 23 million, the Serbs and the Montenegrins number 10.6 million. They control the Yugoslav National Army, the only significant fighting force in the area. Providing the Serbs do not overreach themselves and start being beastly to the Muslims in Kosovo or to Macedonia, a loose Serbian hegemony in the region would make a wider conflict less likely.

It is the possibility of a much wider conflict involving Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia, Albania, Turkey, Greece (both Nato members), Bulgaria, Rumania and possibly certain Islamic countries in the Middle East that could affect Britain's vital interests and it is only that possibility that might warrant the use of our armed forces. But it would have to be a much wider conflict and it would have to be imminent. At present it is neither.

Secondly, the Iranians and others who support and succour Islamic fundamentalism have come to the conclusion that the Judeo-Christian world must be subverted

if Islam is to prosper. Wherever militant Muslims are prepared to raise the Islamic flag, Iran will want to help. At a recent meeting between the combatants in Tadjikistan, behind every Muslim commander sat an Iranian diplomat. A strong Orthodox Serbia would undoubtedly act as a bulwark against any Islamic incursion into western Europe.

Not only does the argument for letting the Serbs establish some kind of loose hegemony in the area make geo-strategic sense, it has, in effect, received de facto recognition. The jigsaw puzzle plan proposed by Cyrus Vance and Lord Owen at Geneva, and accepted in principle but not in detail by all parties, effectively rewards Serbian aggression by letting them keep much of the territory that they have taken by force. It also accepts that some populations will have been permanently moved by ethnic cleansing and cannot be allowed to return to their former homes.

The task of foreign policy strategists is to advise governments how to go some way towards controlling events that affect the national interest and all the way towards controlling at least their own decision-making.

Now a British task force is to be despatched. Its principal role will be to assist in humanitarian relief. But, as the *Ark Royal* with its handful of Harrier ground attack aircraft steams into the Adriatic, the British government will come under intense pressure from the Americans and the Europeans to use its expanding forces in the area for political rather than humanitarian purposes.

If the Government succumbs, it may well find itself authorising military action in the Balkans without really knowing why it is fighting or what it is fighting for. That would be a very clear case of unrealpolitik.

Mind your language

MISPRONUNCIATION by news-readers and suchlike can be infuriating. How stupid they are to say *machismo* like McDonald's, or to use a z-sound in absurd.

But a more prevalent vice is the spelling-pronunciation, derived from reading rather than hearing. I suppose most people today pronounce Arctic with both c's. It was not so in the 19th century, when even the most punctilious speakers said *Artic*. And the upper and lower classes have tended to form an alliance against the autodidact middle classes. Thus the *huntin'*, *shootin'* elision is shared by the country landowner and the poacher. *Picture* said like *pitcher* also spans the classes, except it leaves out the basically educated, those who care whether they speak 'properly'.

Dot Wordsworth



WOODCOCK