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From: Serge Trifkovic
To: HDB
02/20/91

"Civil War in Yugoslavia: The United States' Response"

1. Opening Remarks

No civil war has broken out in Yugoslavia as yet, and the title of today's proceedings might accomplish more if it were changed to "Preventing Yugoslavia's Internal Strife". This body must be very careful not to take sides in a very volatile situation, and to take into account not only the interests of ALL the peoples of Yugoslavia, but also of the United States.

While it can be convincingly argued that the preservation of Yugoslavia's political and territorial integrity is in the interest of this country as well as of Yugoslavia's many ethnic groups, for a start it is enough to keep an open mind, and to look at Yugoslavia as an important element of the complex and often painful post-Communist restructuring in East/Central Europe. Any testimony which omits the historical/political legacy behind a particular problem, or conflict, is not helpful. In the complex, interlocking Yugoslav mosaic, no piece may be looked at in isolation from all the others. In the same way, once a piece is removed, the whole becomes distorted.

On previous two occasions when South Slav lands were engulfed by war in the course of this century, in two world wars, there was one ethnic group there which always fought on the same side with America: the Serbs. Serbian guerrillas were rescuing hundreds of American airmen at a time when, for instance, thousands of Croatian volunteers fought at Stalingrad in Wehrmacht uniforms. The least America can and should do for its old Serbian allies is to listen, and to pause to think, before jumping to conclusions about a very complex and difficult issue. There have been many inaccuracies proffered as truth by some public figures and a section of the media in the United States, which has done inestimable damage to this country's ability to contribute in a positive and constructive manner to the stability in South-Eastern Europe.

I hope and trust, Mr Chairman, that today's hearing will mark a new era. Instead of becoming just another propaganda forum for special interests hell-bent on destroying and dismantling a country friendly to the United States, I hope that this hearing will contribute to our comprehensive understanding of a complex and difficult issue.

2. Creation of Yugoslavia

Some people are inclined to see Yugoslavia as an artificial state, a sort of mini-Soviet Union, created for the benefit of the majority nation. And yet, it is a matter of historical record that the movement for South Slav unity was born in Croatia. There, during 19th century, it found its most eloquent and consistent advocates among the Croatian intellectual and social elite, including Roman Catholic Bishop Strossmayer and language reformer Ljudevit Gaj.

We are talking about a time, Mr Chairman, when the Serbs, and their closest kin Montenegrins, were the only South Slavs to enjoy independent statehood. We are talking about a time, prior to 1914, when Serbia was a parliamentary democracy with a free press and a liberal constitution, while Croatia and Slovenia were ruled by Austrians and Hungarians. To Croats and Slovenes in those days "Yugoslavism" was a broader South Slav framework for the preservation of their threatened identity.

Even 19th century Habsburg general Jelacic [Yelachich], who is now celebrated as a Croatian national hero, asserted that "Serbs and Croats are essentially one people". The proto-Yugoslav rationale for South Slav unity was no lesser than that which guided Italians and Germans on their road to unification under Garibaldi and Bismarck.

~~During~~ ^{At the end of} World War I the Allies offered the Serbs massive territorial enlargement and the creation of Greater Serbia, covering two thirds of today's Yugoslav territory. They wanted to reward the Kingdom of Serbia for its inestimable contribution to the allied cause, paid with hundreds of thousands of Serbian lives. At the same time, until 1918 young Croats and Slovenes fought on the side of Serbia's and America's enemies, as Austrian-Hungarian conscripts or volunteers.

2. Creation of Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia was created on the basis of President Wilson's "Fourteen Points", the blueprint for settling the problem of self-determination of East and Central European nations. As an Allied victory in the Great War appeared increasingly imminent, some Croatian and Slovene politicians started lobbying hard - eg. through the "Yugoslav Committee" based in London - to convince the government of Serbia that they should not be left to the tender mercies of their powerful and expansionist-minded neighbors. The creation of Yugoslavia was, essentially, a way for Slovenia and Croatia to avoid being on the losing side at the end of the war in 1918! This fact was well recognized by a leading Croatian politician, Dr Ante TRUMBICH, who declared:

"Serbia proved ready to sacrifice her state individuality in order that one common state of all Serbs, Croats and Slovenes be created. And so, she attains the absolute right to be called the Yugoslav Piedmont."

These are historical facts, which demolish the myth of "artificial creation" of Yugoslavia.

That is also the key difference between Yugoslavia and the USSR: its constituent nations VOLUNTARILY entered it - albeit in order to defend their particular national interests. Freely elected Slovenian and Croatian representatives went to Belgrade on December 1, 1918, to press for immediate unification with Serbia - months before the victors converged at Versailles. The new state, far from being a "Versailles creation", offered Croats and Slovenes an opportunity to preserve their territorial and linguistic integrity.

Last, but by no means least, the United States was among the first to recognize the new South Slav state, which - in the considered opinion of the Wilson administration - fully complied with his well-known democratic principles.

3. Yugoslavia in War and Peace

It is often claimed that between two world wars Yugoslavia was dominated by Serbs, while other nationalities were oppressed. And yet, the undisputed leader of the Croat people in pre-war Yugoslavia, Vlatko Machek, signed a key agreement with the government in Belgrade in 1939, which opened with a statement that "Yugoslavia is the best guarantee of the independence and progress of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes".

In March 1941, in the darkest hour for all friends of liberty in Europe, the Serbs took to the streets of Belgrade in support of an anti-Nazi coup. * Hitler's subsequent rage resulted in the destruction of the country, which was divided among the victorious Axis and their satellites. Being on the Allied side cost Serbia yet another generation of its youth, for the second time in twenty-five years.

In Croatia a Fascist puppet government of the Ustasha movement was installed, which proceeded with a systematic policy of killing Serbs and Jews throughout the new "state". The Ustashi perpetrated a Serbian Holocaust equal in proportion - if not in actual scale - to that experienced by the Jews of occupied Europe. Pro-Yugoslav Croats were targeted for elimination no less than ^{most} Serbs living in Croatia. The late Dr Branko Peselj [Pe-shely], a prominent pre-war Croatian politician who lived here in Washington for many years until his death last September, confirmed in Hrvatska Revija [Croatian Review] that Pavelic's Ustashi had intended to eliminate all Serbs in Croatia from the outset. In this they almost succeeded: hundreds of thousands of Serbs were brutally massacred, ^{and an untold number was expelled from the Croatian state,} as is amply documented from not only Yugoslav, but also contemporary German and Italian sources.

* As Churchill declared before the House of Commons,
"Yugoslavia has found its soul!"

4. Tito's Legacy

During the multi-cornered civil war which ensued in Yugoslavia under Axis occupation, the Communist Party, led by a Croatian revolutionary, Josip Broz TITO, emerged victorious. He ruled the country for 35 years, clamping down hard on every manifestation of nationalism, which he perceived as a threat to his personal power. His "No. 2" in the last decade and a half of his life was Edvard Kardelj, a Slovene.

The chief victim of their policy was Serbia: as the largest and most populous, it had to be cut down in size and influence. This explains why ethnic Albanians in Serbia were encouraged in their ever escalating demands, and eventually given a state-within-the-state, known as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo. Well over half a million Serbs in Croatia, or ethnic Italians in Istria (which had never belonged to Croatia before 1945) were not deemed worthy of similar treatment.

Yes, Serbia was regarded with particular odium by Communists, because its pro-Western resistance movement of General Mihailovic was a major obstacle to the establishment of Communist control in Yugoslavia at the end of the war. To state this fact is not to claim that other Yugoslav ethnic groups profited from Communism. No! They were all sufferers in a system designed to serve the interests of the Party nomenklatura.

Tito's system of self-rule was based on his ability to balance one group against another, one nation against another, in line with the classic dictum DIVIDE ET IMPERA. Apprehensive of all real or potential rivals to the point of paranoia, he devised an unworkable system of collective decision-making which made him a permanent giant amongst dwarfs. In practice, his was a policy reminiscent of that French king who declared Après moi, la deluge. Today, a decade after Tito, the deluge is at Yugoslavia's gates. It is our task to try and help the country avoid the worst consequences of the flood.

4. Communists vs. Democrats

It is a rich irony of Tito's legacy that the real culprits for Yugoslavia's present plight, former Communist bigwigs who had enjoyed countless undeserved privileges under the late dictator, are now presenting themselves as "democrats" and "nationalists". The most blatant example is the republic of Croatia, which tries hard to present itself to an unsuspecting world as "pro-Western" and "democratic". But let us beware the appearances!

Croatia is today ruled by a former Communist General, Franjo Tudjman, a trusted military apparatchik who became a violent nationalist in late mid-life. His defence minister is ^{Marin Špegelj} another former Communist general, a man who before video cameras apparently advocated killing not only active Yugoslav Army officers serving in Croatia, but also their wives and children, as well as Serbian servicemen. Tudjman's prime minister is ^{Josip Manolić} a former high-ranking official of the Communist secret police. He selected another ex-Communist secret policeman, ^{Josip Boljkovac} as his minister of the interior. This man was also seen by TV viewers in Yugoslavia threatening physical elimination of Serbs in Croatia.

These unsavory truths are not widely publicized by the anti-Yugoslav lobby here. And yet, no amount of PR skill and "democratic" rhetoric can conceal the fact that such people are still hostages to deeply authoritarian and dogmatic modes of thought and action, certainly no less than Serbia's president Milosevic.

The above should serve as a warning against facile divisions of Yugoslavia's republics into "pro-Western", democratic, and "neo-Communist", authoritarian ones. Admittedly, Serbia's president Milosevic appears to have strong authoritarian tendencies; but the democratic credentials of Croatia's present rulers are highly suspect too - and not every democratically elected government is necessarily good government. Hitler came to power in 1933 by taking advantage of democratic mechanism, only to destroy it soon thereafter!

5. Slovenian Democracy

Even Slovenia, less affected by the atavistic clarion call of blood-and-soil brand of chauvinism, is a case in point. [A few weeks ago we learned that 95% of Slovenia's voters supported independence at a referendum. The lingering doubt persists: NO cause in a Western democratic society has ever been supported by a 19:1 margin... Besides,] it is unclear why Slovenia's president, Milan Kucan, should be considered more of a democrat than Milosevic on the basis of formal credentials? He, too, belongs to the former Communist Party, which in Serbia renamed itself Socialist, while in Slovenia it became the Party of Democratic Renewal.

Kucan presides over a government which demands 15 years' residence for citizenship, ~~for Yugoslav residents in non Slovenian Yugoslavs~~ thereby threatening expulsion to hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from other parts of Yugoslavia which had helped build its economy. Those people are in danger of being physically and verbally abused if they speak Serbo-Croatian in public in Slovenia, and their children are subjected to aggressive assimilation. We are talking about some 20% of Slovenia's population, which is not only disenfranchised, but also in danger of losing property rights. ALTHOUGH LEGALLY RESIDENT IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY, THEY ARE NOW FINDING THEMSELVES IN THE POSITION OF ILLEGAL ALIENS COMPARABLE TO FRUIT PICKERS IN CALIFORNIA. Kucan presides over a government which claims that property rights in the republic can be acquired only by Slovene citizens - which is a somewhat eccentric position to take in an ever increasingly integrated Europe.

For governments to be democratic, they must follow democratic policies and show respect for human rights. No government of a Yugoslav republic can claim such distinction right now. While there are many complaints one can lay against the government of Serbia in this respect, by the same token others need to be judged. This brings us to the issue of human rights.

From: Serge Trifkovic

To: David Vuich (c/o HDB)

Feb. 21, 1991

"Civil War in Yugoslavia: The United States' Response"

I am addressing this committee, Mr Chairman, not only as a representative of SAVA, the Serbian-American Voters' Alliance, but also as an American deeply concerned about our national interest in a sensitive and strategically important part of the world. I fully recognize the importance of the way this country responds to the crisis in Yugoslavia. This only serves to heighten my concern about the manner in which various special interest groups, whose primary allegiance is not to this country, have abused our democratic process in the past, and appear intent on doing so in the future.

I am talking about the well-financed, well-orchestrated campaign of Yugoslavia's would-be dismantlers, people who have an ax to grind five thousand miles from here. To them, interests of the United States are of a secondary, if any importance. Unlike the employers of Mr Dioguardi, however, and like most Serbian Americans, I wish to see this country's interest served first and foremost. THE FACT IS THAT A RATIONAL AND COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF AMERICA'S INTERESTS IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE DEMANDS A POLICY AIMED AT RECONCILING YUGOSLAVIA'S CONFLICTS, PRESERVING ITS POLITICAL AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY, AND MAINTAINING THE ABILITY OF THE UNITED STATES TO APPEAR AS AN IMPARTIAL, BONA FIDE FRIEND OF ALL YUGOSLAVS.

The paramount interest of the United States in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis is to promote and maintain stability. Nowhere more is this so than in East/Central Europe, at a time when future developments in the Soviet Union are under a big question mark. An unconsolidated, conflict-ridden Yugoslavia is inherently unstable. However, even less stable would be a disintegrated Yugoslavia composed of mutually antagonistic mini-states! There are nine million Serbs, which makes them more numerous than Yugoslavia's Croatians,

SAVA TESTIMONY ON YU - 2

Slovenes and Albanians taken together. If a "solution" were imposed on them which would amputate large chunks of their territory, and which would leave millions of their kin under uncertain foreign rule, we would have a new time bomb, and new instability - compared to which all we have seen so far would pale into insignificance. LET US HAVE NO ILLUSIONS, MR CHAIRMAN: THERE IS NO WAY FOR YUGOSLAVIA TO DISINTEGRATE IN A PEACEFUL, NEGOTIATED MANNER. UNILATERAL SOLUTIONS IMPOSED ON ANY CONSTITUENT YUGOSLAV NATION WILL FUEL NEW CONFLICTS AND ANIMOSITIES FOR GENERATIONS TO COME.

It is, therefore, in our interest to seek a new Yugoslav solution, free from the false dilemma of "federalist" versus "confederalist" solutions, for the sake of the common Yugoslav market, of Yugoslavia's entry into Europe, of the avoidance of a nasty and bloody civil war. There are billions of dollars we have invested into that country, through international financial institutions, commercial banks or government loans. A COLLAPSE OF YUGOSLAVIA, AND ITS SUBSEQUENT DEFAULT ON ALMOST TWENTY BILLION DOLLARS OF FOREIGN DEBTS, WOULD HURT THE AMERICAN TAXPAYER VERY BADLY INDEED, which - even by itself - is enough of an argument for us to seek alternative solutions!

Leaders of nations come and go, Mr Chairman, but nations as such are here to stay. If we are not happy with the election of Dr Waldheim as Austria's president, we are nevertheless careful to avoid identifying Austrians as such with him. To take an extreme example, in the present conflict in the Middle East we are also careful to stress that we have no quarrel with the people of Iraq, and that the country itself will remain an important factor in the regional balance when this is all over. Therefore, even if some of us dislike, say, Mr Milosevic as an authoritarian figure, it would be both irresponsible and short-sighted to allow such antipathy of a person to color our policy towards the entire Serbian nation. That nation has been a faithful friend and

ally of the United States in two world wars; and diplomatic, trade and cultural relations between the Kingdom of Serbia and the United States are over a hundred years old. In the same vein, Mr Chairman, I am not suggesting that we ought to conduct - for example - an "anti-Croatian" policy just because Croatia's president Tudjman is a chauvinistic and authoritarian ex-Communist general, or because during World War II Croatia was ruled by genocidal Nazis who declared war on the United States on 11 December 1941!

Let me conclude, Mr Chairman, by appealing for calm, reason, and comprehensive analysis, before we commit ourselves to any course of action. But above all, let us put American interests first - and we may find out that they coincide with those of a renewed, viable and prosperous Yugoslavia!