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position on the Europeans: did not lead. When they said no, he gave up his proposal and agreed instead to a plan for United Nations forces to protect six Muslim "safe havens" in Bosnia. Having put down Vance-Owen as not strong enough, he opted for something distinctly weaker.

In the week since the safe haven plan was agreed in Washington, it has turned out to be a bitter joke. The Serbs, undeterred, have devastated one of the supposed havens, Gorazde, killing many refugees. They have resumed shelling Sarajevo. The United Nations has had difficulty finding any troops for the supposed protective role.

The safe haven plan is in fact nothing more than a Western cave-in to the aggressors. The havens will be, at best, overcrowded refugee camps with no viable economic life. Serbian forces, not disarmed, will still surround them. And U.N. relief convoys will still have to bargain with Serbian gunmen for permission to go through.

Partition would complete Serbian humiliation of the West, and especially of the United States. The Serbs will have had their way not only in Bosnia but in Croatia, where Serbian militia hold 20 percent of the country. The ugliest elements in Serbian political life, modern-day Fascists, will have been proved right in calling America a paper tiger.

President Clinton inherited an appalling problem because of George Bush's weakness on Yugoslavia. But he made it worse — dramatized the weakness — by calling for stronger action and then giving up. The precedent is a terrible one, for other areas of ethnic tension and for American prestige.

His political advisers urge Mr. Clinton to avoid involvement. Americans didn't want it, they said. But the failure to lead on this painful problem — the failure to act against murderous aggression — will haunt Bill Clinton for the rest of his political life. □

Abroad at Home

ANTHONY LEWIS

The Price of Weakness

BOSTON

When I asked Cyrus Vance how he was feeling, I meant it as a telephone formality. But his answer was about Bosnia. "Sad," he said.

President Clinton had just signaled that he might accept a three-way partition of Bosnia, allowing Serbs to keep the fruits of their aggression. In light of all that had happened, I asked, was that now the best that could be done?

"I wish we hadn't been put in a position," Mr. Vance replied, "where people say this is the best thing that can be done."

Did he mean that it would not have come to this if the United States had provided more forceful leadership?

"Yes, it took leadership," Mr. Vance said, "and I don't think we've demonstrated that."

But can partition at least stop the killing? I asked.

"I'm not at all sure that it can," Mr. Vance said. "I hope and pray that somehow we will get peace. But I don't know that the Muslims will go along with partition. They don't like it, and I understand why they don't."

Mr. Vance and Lord Owen, working together as mediators, tried to preserve Bosnia as a federal state with ethnic cantons. They warned against allowing destruction of a country that was internationally recognized and a member of the United Nations.

"Right from the beginning," Mr. Vance said, "We always said, 'there can be no partition. It's wrong. It's the equivalent of endorsing ethnic cleansing.'"

Coming from Cy Vance, a man of understatement, those were strong words: a cry of pain at the fact that the United States and its European allies have now essentially accepted the result of ethnic cleansing. Cities where Muslims were the majority or lived in peace with Serbs and Croats, often intermarried, will be Muslim-free, their historic mosques reduced to rubble.

Even Lord Owen has given up hope of saving much from the human and political disaster. He advised the Bosnian Government to "look very seriously" at partition, which would mean giving most of the land to Serbs and Croats, leaving a landlocked rump — or perhaps some uncontiguous bits — for the Muslims.

At a crucial point this spring, President Clinton failed to support the Vance-Owen plan, apparently believing that the cantonal arrangement would leave Bosnia too weak. He said he wanted to use air power against the Serbs, and lift the arms embargo on the Muslim victims.

But Mr. Clinton did not press his