

NYT: 1-26-93

Before We Step Into a Bosnian Quagmire

To the Editor:

Re "Criticized as Appeaser, Vance Defends His Role in the Balkans" (front page, Jan. 19): Just as the Clinton State Department, heir in some ways to the Carter State Department, takes over foreign policy, Cyrus Vance, architect of the Carter philosophy, is under attack for doing what he does best: stalling for time while trying to limit damage from a mess most of the world has neither the patience nor wish to understand.

I have never been an admirer of Mr. Vance until now. As a Serbian-American outraged by the criminal, almost suicidal policies of President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia and his holdover Communist henchmen, I am equally angered at the West's shortsighted, bellicose response to the tragedy in the Balkans. The same pundits who shuddered at United States involvement in Vietnam would drag us into a Balkan conflict aimed at punishing the Serbs.

Only Mr. Vance, Britain's Lord Owen and Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali seem to appreciate that in the Balkans nothing is black and white. Resolving gray areas of ethnicity, religion, geopolitics and history mired in almost unimaginable violence and passionate hatred requires more than genuflecting to public opinion. Haven't we learned any-

thing? That Mr. Milosevic and many of the Serb paramilitary leaders in Bosnia deserve to be brought up on charges of war crimes is beyond doubt. So do Muslim and Croat leaders whose forces devastate Serbian populations. Mr. Vance and other statesmen understand that and do not seek to appease any of them.

But they also know that the Serbian people — long the region's staunchest supporters of Western pluralism and Christian values in the face of Communist dictatorship and Muslim fundamentalism — run the danger of being wiped out by the Western reaction to misguided Serbian political leaders. And they seem alone in comprehending how the West's premature, German-driven recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia gave those self-serving leaders fuel for the flames of the Serb people's nationalist and religious fears.

Mr. Vance practices the vanishing art of diplomacy with skill, eschewing the sound-bite school of the quick fix for the laborious — and apparently unpopular — world view. We who believe in the survival of the Serbs as a people can only pray he holds sway, and that his former disciples, like Secretary of State Warren M. Christopher, take a page from their former teacher.

NICK PETERS

Montclair, N.J., Jan. 19, 1993