

Q & A: Diplomacy and Force In Facing the Balkan Conflict

John D. Scanlan, U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1985 to 1989, recently returned from Belgrade, where he was Prime Minister Milan Panic's foreign affairs adviser. He spoke with Heather Green about the situation in the Balkans.

Q. Is there a dynamic either in Yugoslavia or around Slobodan Milosevic [the president of Serbia] that makes the expansion of Serbia inevitable?

A. I never believe in inevitability. Mr. Milosevic has played on the legitimate interests of the Serbian people to promote his own political career and his desire to remain in power. I think the world should recognize that the Serbian people do have legitimate interests, especially the right to self-determination for the 3 million Serbs living outside the borders of Serbia and Montenegro.

Q. After your role inside the Yugoslav government, how would you describe its nature?

A. The regime is self-serving. It serves the interests of Mr. Milosevic. The regime preaches militant activism and creates an atmosphere of fear to stay in power. Power is the name of the game. They will hold onto political power as long as they can, whether for another year, another month or another day.

Q. Why did Mr. Panic seek the prime ministership?

A. He sincerely believed that he could make a difference. He sincerely believed that there was a need for somebody who could offer a peaceful alternative to the Yugoslav people and to the Serbian nation. He had the good fortune to emigrate to the United States, to become successful and wealthy, and he believed that he had a duty and an obligation to try.

Q. Was the effort worthwhile?

A. Yes. He brought hope to the Serbian people, he mobilized the best of them in his campaign. As a result of that they still have hope that they will prevail in the end and restore Serbia's good name.

Q. Does the peace settlement in Croatia have a chance of lasting?

A. It will stand as long as we in the West want it to stand. It depends on the resolve of the United Nations. I think that it has to last until a permanent arrangement of some kind is established which will permit the Serbs in Croatia to feel sure

about their security. It is up to the Croatian government to make them feel comfortable.

Q. What is the likelihood of the violence spreading to Kosovo or Macedonia?

A. That scenario has been somewhat overstated. Mr. Milosevic's regime does not need any additional problems, either within Serbia, in Kosovo, or anyplace else. My own view is that we in the West should establish a relatively strong military presence in Macedonia, with the agreement of the Macedonian government, as a deterrent. The troops should be stationed as close to the border as possible to make it quite clear to Mr. Milosevic that the United Nations would be ready to move.

Q. What is the significance of the U.S. airdrop?

A. Very significant in terms of providing the element of hope. It has made it quite clear that the United States is not indifferent to the plight of the people in those enclaves.

Q. What about the UN presence in Bosnia?

A. What the United Nations can do depends on the rules of engagement. The UN forces were put in there merely to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid. If the rules of engagement restrict your ability to fire when fired upon, it is difficult to establish the kind of credibility that might give greater pause to those who want to continue the hostilities on both sides. You need a much larger UN force plus rules of engagement that make it quite clear that they will return fire with everything they've got.

Q. What policy planning in the West led to the hesitancy on the part of Europe and the U.S. to become involved?

A. The main problem was the failure to anticipate the intensity and the brutality of the conflicts. Beyond that I think that there was a failure of consensus and will on the part of European nations to become actively engaged. If you are going to be engaged militarily it is easier to do it up front, before things get out of control.

Q. Did the Europeans have the capability to enforce a diplomatic plan?

A. Europeans certainly do have enough military force to handle this and they could have if they had acted more firmly and consistently up front and had been more evenhanded. The Europeans were not evenhanded and that undermined their credibility.

International Herald Tribune March 22/93