

Extracts from Diary of US Ambassador to Croatia Peter Galbraith
July 1995 – September 1995
Source: National Defense University

July 20

Back from Washington, and Vermont. It has been a disastrous and demeaning two weeks in which the Bosnian Serbs took over the Srebrenica safe area, and have attacked the Zepa safe area which appears to have fallen, or to be on the verge of falling. The Bosnian Serbs have been true to form in Srebrenica, and the papers are full of accounts completely reminiscent of 1992: civilians massacred along the roadside, young girls taken off of buses, raped, killed and their naked bodies discarded like human rubbish, men and boys rounded up for camps. Of Srebrenica's 40,000, some 10,000 are still missing.

In Washington, I tried to buck people up, and perhaps to shame them into action. I saw the Secretary to complain about the Milosevic option, noting his continued support of the Bosnian Serb military. This includes running an integrated air defense system that shot down an American plane, paying salaries of Bosnian Serb officers, the VJ maintaining Bosnian Serb military vehicles in Serbia, and the rounding up of conscripts for the BSA. Also, given the close consultation between Milosevic and Mladic (Mladic was present during Milosevic's marathon meeting with Bildt) it is inconceivable that Milosevic did not know and, at least tacitly bless, the Srebrenica-Zepa operations. I also urged our Security Council legal proposal to aid the Bosnians by providing money so they can buy weapons. The Secretary was clearly briefed on my views, but listened carefully. He indicated that it may come to a covert program and that I had a point on Milosevic. I did not however get the impression that he was going to change our Milosevic diplomatic track just now. And, indeed, Frasure seems to be going along with a new Bildt mechanism on reimposition of sanctions.

I also strongly urged Donalin and Holbrooke not to write off Zepa. A public statement that we are drawing the line at Goradze could have disastrous consequences for the 16,000 people at Zepa. After Srebrenica, they may find it preferable to fight to the death and we shouldn't worsen their situation.

[...]

July 21

Saw Akashi to deliver a tough demarche that all UN personnel should be withdrawn from places where they might be hostages. He spoke of the UN's dual role and of the continued importance of monitoring and reporting. I pointed out this only created potential hostages, and would be a barrier to effective action. He still doesn't get it. The demarche incidentally includes words of warning that the Bosnian Serb leadership will be held personally responsible for the fate of the hostages. This is language I like to hear.

[...]

July 22

I dictated a hasty cable describing last night's dinner with the headline "Tudjman decides for direct military intervention to save Bihac, says Susak." In it I said we had two credible options for handling the situation. These were:

-- Do nothing. The fall of Bihac would create 160,000 new refugees, and strike a further blow at the credibility of the United Nations effort. If the international community won't save Bihac, would it not be better to have the Croatsians save it than the Serbs take it?

-- Promise the Croatsians that if they exercise restraint, the U.S. will oppose any further sanctions relief on Serbia until it recognizes Croatia. Last November 13, we were able to head off a similar Croatian decision by assuring Tudjman that we would use all leverage on Serbia, including the maintenance of sanctions, to bring about a peaceful resolution of the Krajina situation. With our Milosevic track, we have nothing to offer Croatia in terms of pressure for the peaceful recovery of its territory. Hence, the Croatian decision to recover the Krajina militarily. Since the fall of Bihac would make that action more difficult, the current Serb attacks are accelerating the Croatian timetable.

[...]

July 24

War appears imminent. The Croatsians plan to move tomorrow at 4:00 a.m. on Bosanska Grahovo. The Serbs have artillery in Sector South and plan to retaliate by shelling Croatian coastal cities. The Croatian plan would then be to take a sharp left at Grahovo and move onto Knin. They would punch a corridor through Slunj to Bihac. In the north they plan to move on Kostionica. They would also take Petrinja, and the territory around Virginmost, Topusko, and Glina, so as to put Zagreb out of artillery range. Cervenko has told me much of their war plans and so has Susak.

Unlike November 13, 1994, we will not tell the Croatians not to do it. Holbrooke bought my arguments and says he advanced them with the White House. They met on the issue Saturday and today. Tarnoff wants to send a demarche warning the Croatians of the dangers, as if they hadn't thought of them themselves. In a war is imminent cable, I said I had warned the Croatians of the dangers so as to head off such silliness.

July 25

[...]

I received a demarche on Bihac. It is actually rather good. It expresses understanding of the Croatian position ("with the Serbs attacking the Bihac enclave from Croatian territory, and the Sarajevo requesting your assistance, we cannot dispute your right to intervene military to repel the Serbs"), but goes on to warn the Croatians against human rights abuses of the Serb population, mistreatment of POWs, and so on. It does call for limiting the Bihac operation and not making it the general attack on the UNPAS, but this is of course not how it will develop.

I am instructed to deliver the demarche to the highest available GOC official. However, Tudjman, Granic, Susak, and Sarinic are out of town. I give it to Zuzul at lunch. Actually he is the best interlocutor as he understands its significance. As long as Croatia behaves well in the conduct of its operations, we will not support any punitive action. Now Croatia has no reason not to move directly through Krajina

to save Bihac. The demarche includes an extraordinary line "we appreciate the close consultation with your government in the past week, as well as your willingness to expend blood and treasure to help defend the Bosnians." Zuzul said he would pass the talking points on to Tudjman and asked if they could be made public (I urged not).

More broadly Zuzul described the situation in Bihac as a race against time. He estimated it would take 10 days for the operation in Bosnia to reach Bihac. However, Bihac might not be able to last so long. If so, Croatia would have to go directly. He said things would be clearer by the weekend. Zuzul emphasized that Bihac was critical to Croatia, now more important than even Knin.

I spoke to Weisel and described our demarche. He liked it very much and tracked what he would recommend for the German government.

Tone heard an extraordinary story from a man from Srebrenica whom she had interviewed in Tuzla. He had been captured by the Serbs in the woods, mistreated in transit, taken to a stadium (apparently Bratunac) where Mladic had taunted some 4,000 prisoners ("your Alija can't help you;" ... "the Muslims should never have left Yugoslavia"), and then he was transported on a packed truck to Konjevic Polje where the group was machine gunned. This refugee escaped when the bullet grazed his temple creating much blood but doing little damage. He and another survivor hid in a ditch as the Serbs bulldozed the bodies. He estimated 150 were killed in his group but the implication is that all 5,000 military aged males who were captured with the fall of Srebrenica had been executed. I sent a NODIS describing the story and strongly urging reconsideration of our decision to write off Zepa. However, later I learned that Zepa town had already fallen.

[...]

July 27

[...]

I had a long talk with Holbrooke, who assessed my view as a reluctant belief that Croatian entry into the war is better than the continuation of the status quo. I insisted my view is that, if the UN won't save Bihac, then it is better for Croatia to save it and the 160,000 people who live there than to have them ethnically cleansed by the Serbs. In short, in the hierarchy of evils, the fall of Bihac is a greater one than a wider war. It seems my view has prevailed, and largely because I have pushed hard and written persuasively. The Croatians are much more likely to act because we have not given them a red light. I have emphasized the parts of our message that reflect understanding of the Croatian position, while emphasizing over and over the importance of protecting human rights and UN peacekeepers. I hope this is the right course of action. I feel responsibility for the consequences.

[...]

I spoke to Chris Hoh after the dinner who said the Deputies Committee, which met on my cable, want to do one more demarche asking the Croats to wait for NATO. I asked sarcastically if NATO planned to do anything. The DC is a pathetic group that thinks it controls policy, but because its recommendations are so weak (do a memo, send a demarche) it really controls nothing. I speak to Chris Hill secure, and he says the demarche would just be a repeat of what we received earlier this week. In any event no demarche ever arrived.

[...]

July 29

[...]

I received a demarche instruction to see Tudjman or the highest available GOC official to press our point that Croatia should withhold on military action. This represented a slight change from our earlier position that any Croatian action should be limited. This was the product of Friday's Deputies' Committee meeting. As Chris Hill explained to me, in the absence of a policy, the DC wants to (1) have a meeting, (2) have a report, or (3) send a cable. Since they were already meeting on a report, the only course of action is to send a cable.

Some of the points were a bit silly. The Croats have obviously already assessed the risks of FRY intervention and their prospects for success "in the mountainous area of Krajina." On the other hand, the message usefully calls for more time to see if anything can be negotiated, and doesn't change our basic position that "these are Zagreb's decisions to make."

[...]

July 30

Shattuck came to town. He is making the trip solely to investigate the Srebrenica disappeared and it is directly a response to my cable recounting Tone's interview in Tuzla. Tone gave him the story in detail and how to contact the witness. His aide, Josiah Rosenblatt, referred at lunch to the August 1 date even though some of the Embassy staff there don't know it nor does Tone. It is outrageous that a secret can be so widely disseminated and that even professionals don't keep it.

[...]

August 1

[...]

At the press conference Shattuck outlines his findings. He has talked to two survivors of the killings, as well as other victims of Serb atrocities. He says he heard first hand reports of mass executions, robberies, rapes, and harrassment. Unfortunately, he misses the real point of what he heard. That there may have been the systematic killing of between eight and twelve thousand Srebrenica disappeared. I jump in to make this point, and in a later brief to the NYT, LATimes, and W Post ask the question "where are the missing?" Shattuck could have gotten more attention, although eventually he makes CNN.

[...]

August 3

War will begin at 4:30 tomorrow. I saw Tadjman at 5:45 P.M. with our final demarche. I described what Babic had agreed to, and pointed out that Croatia had achieved everything it sought. I emphasized that Babic had agreed to negotiate for a political settlement within Croatia, and that he understood he could not get as much as the Z-4 Plan.

I had received demarche instructions this morning, ostensibly in support of my agreement with Babic yesterday. In fact the instructions were incredibly weak and seemed to indicate we were only going through the motions. For example, they conceded a key Croatian point when they said "we understand that Knin's intentions must be measured by actions not words." The punch line was an underwhelming "we urge you to evaluate the serb reaction carefully and to explore fully the possible opening for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict."

I called Frasure to say that this was guaranteed to undermine what we had achieved in Belgrade. He was busy getting ready for a Bildt meeting. When he got back to me he said the Deputies Committee would take up the war in Croatia at 5:00. This is guaranteed to produce nothing and my meeting was at 5:45.

I called Tarnoff, now the Acting Secretary. I said a war in Croatia would be a terrible human tragedy involving thousands of dead and more than 100,000 refugees. It would produce an ethnically pure Croatia and undermine the hope for multi ethnicity in the Balkans. The people in Krajina should not be punished to this extent for their bad leaders.

[...]

August 5

The Croatians have made great advances, taking Knin this morning. I saw Granic at 6:00 who outlined his strategic view.

[...]

The Deputies Committee has decided I should not help. They want to reduce the perception of a U.S. green light. This is almost obscene. They grant a green light and then don't wish me, who has unique credibility with both sides, to try and stop the killing. Meanwhile tens of thousands of people are leaving their homes.

I talk to Frasure, Holbrooke, and Tarnoff to try to get this decision reversed. Holbrooke is sympathetic but in the end I get a NIACT instructing me not to get involved.

[...]

August 7

The day began with a call from Frasure which was something of an apology for my treatment over the past few days. He explained that he and Holbrooke had wanted a war because "it represented a fundamental reshuffle of the deck." They had not wanted me involved in the ceasefire because it might exacerbate the impression of a U.S. green light with the allies. I am glad all of this is on his conscience.

[...]

August 16

The Holbrooke delegation and I called on Tudjman to present the plan at a noon meeting followed by lunch. Tudjman was accompanied by Sarinic, Granic, Susak, Zuzul, and Foreign Policy Advisor Matic. Tudjman listened carefully as Holbrooke went through his points.

He then turned in the most astounding performance I have heard from him. While agreeing with the American plan, he then completely trashed the Muslims, the Federation, and the idea of a continuing Bosnian state. He trotted out his familiar tirade that Croatia represents the edge of western civilization, that the Bosnian Muslims are Islamicists at heart seeking a Muslim state from the Adriatic through Sandjak to Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia ("a state even more powerful than Serbia"), and that Croatia was doing the West a favor with its civilizing mission with regard to the Bosnian Muslims.

Bosnia-Herzegovina, he said, might continue as an internationally recognized state "for the time being." Later he said in English "Bosnia Herzegovina has no future." Tudjman went on to talk about trading Tuzla for Banja Luka, in short his menu map from the May 10 dinner in London.

I found particularly galling Tudjman's blithe assumption that we share his prejudices and prescriptions. I passed Holbrooke a note pointing out "these are all Tudjman's old prejudices, fully re-emerged after 18 months of relative abeyance. Tudjman needs to be responded to very harshly. It was the justification for the Croat-Muslim war. I always used to tell him that Americans were most sympathetic to

the Muslims precisely because we saw them as the most western of Bosnia's three peoples." Holbrooke replied "I agree -- but not now, NOT HERE, NOT YET, beyond what we already said, this is far too serious, if he proceeds on it, to deal with now.

I sent Frasure a note saying "congratulations. Here is your fundamental reshuffle of the deck." To which he replied with characteristic humor "I'm quite sure Tudjman just came to these conclusions in the last couple of weeks of his long and interesting life!"

[...]

Amb Galbraith note to
Holbrooke 11/16, 1995
meeting

Dick -
These are all Tudy man's
old prejudices, fully reemerged
after 18 months of relative abeyance.
This line needs to be responded to
very harshly. It was the justification
for the Croat-Muslim War. I always
used to tell him that Americans
were most sympathetic to
the Muslims precisely because
we saw them as the most
Western of Bosnia's 3 peoples.

Peter.

Peter - I agree - but NOT NOW, NOT HERE, NOT YET
beyond what we already said. This is
1/2 the case. I will see. I will do it now.

[...]

September 17

Holbrooke arrives at 8:10. We meet on the plane. He says his most important message is to tell the Croats not to attack Banja Luka, and asks my opinion. I point out the advantages of regaining Muslim-interest territory in Prijedor, and he says that Washington has finally seen the policy error it had made in counselling restraint on such cases (a policy Holbrooke supported, but I don't say this). On Banja Luka, I point out the advantage of taking the high ground (Manjaca) above the city. This would put Banja Luka, B-H's most important Serb city, in a position analogous to Sarajevo. Deals would be possible to give both cities some hinterland. Holbrooke angrily accuses me of trying to micromanage the military operations, which I deny since I am just offering my assessment. Later, when Clark mentions Manjaca, Holbrooke softpedals pointing to the history of it. I think he sees my point.

In the car we discuss Eastern Slavonia. Holbrooke feels that Milosevic's proposal represents a basis for negotiation. It is obvious Holbrooke knows little about the issue and has not read my cable explaining how far we have gotten. He wants to know whether the Croats can be persuaded to accept some kind of referendum which might even specify that the question is on great autonomy in Croatia. I say no referendum will work.

We see Tudjman at 9:00. Holbrooke gives him an account of the Sarajevo negotiations, and the screwup on heavy weapons language. He then warns on Banja Luka and Tudjman says he agrees. Holbrooke informs Tudjman that Mladic is in the hospital, and there is a look of pure delight on Tudjman's face.