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BOSNIA REMEMBERED – PART III: THE LESSONS OF BOSNIA

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Specialist Martin J. Begosh, U.S. Army, 127th Military Police Company, was born on Memorial Day 1971. His father, Andrew, fought in Vietnam, where his uncle, also Martin, was killed. As a postwar peacekeeping mission began under international scrutiny, Specialist Begosh's vehicle hit an anti-tank mine. The explosion fractured his leg and shrapnel injured his foot. "Marty is a brave boy," his mother, Judy, said after the accident, speaking from their Rockville, Maryland home. "He doesn't scare easily, he is well trained, and he can do his job."

On New Year's Eve 1995, Specialist Begosh, then 24, became the first U.S. casualty of the Bosnia War. As 1996 began, Begosh's wounds captured the national news cycle and fueled what had become election year talking points in the debate for and against the Bosnia intervention. After the November 1995 Dayton Accords agreement, 60,000 troops, one third of which were Americans, deployed to Bosnia to enforce the accords as part of a multinational "implementation force," or IFOR. At the time, President Bill Clinton told the American people U.S. forces would remain in Bosnia because "this mission should and will take about one year." He also warned Americans to expect casualties. "I will take every measure possible to minimize these risks," the President said, "but we must be prepared for that possibility."¹

Prior to ordering U.S. troops into Bosnia, Clinton's political opponents had attacked him for the mission on two fronts. Risking American lives to solve a European problem was one of them, and, as a result, Begosh's injuries merited Presidential comment. "Mines have always been our biggest concern, and we're working very hard on them," said President Clinton, responding to the first U.S. casualty at a news conference. "It's going to be very difficult to get rid of them all. But the mission itself is going well." The U.S. military never did clear all the land mines, which remain marked and scattered throughout Bosnia today.

Despite warnings of America overstaying its welcome, the tenuous peace in Bosnia held. But fears of mission creep, the second argument Clinton's adversaries used against him, proved accurate. In December 1996, a year after the deployment started—and when the U.S. intervention should theoretically have been complete—the Bosnia mission changed on paper from implementation to stabilization. This semantic trope altered little on the ground, and U.S. forces did not leave Bosnia until December 2004, a departure driven more by Iraq and Afghanistan war requirements than U.S. strategic goals in the former Yugoslavia. Today, 2,500 European Union troops remain in Bosnia as a multinational peacekeeping force. U.S. troops remained in Bosnia nine times as long as the President had projected, and absent the September 11 terrorist attacks, would probably still be in Bosnia today.

¹ President Bill Clinton, speech transcript, November 27, 1995.

Although President Clinton's predictions for the Bosnian War's length proved wrong, the American people did not seem to care. Only twelve Americans died during nine years of peacekeeping operations, and according to Army records "Not one American soldier was killed by hostile fire."² Despite the casualty and mission creep debates leading up to military action, the Bosnia War delivered the lowest ratio of combat deaths relative to war length in U.S. history. American citizens appear comfortable permitting their military forces to go almost anywhere on the planet as long as the cost in blood remains minuscule.

While the absence of casualties in Bosnia calls to mind the old cliché that it's better to be lucky than good, luck does not make the concern of mission creep any less relevant. The day after President Clinton announced the Bosnia mission, James Webb, then a writer and former defense official, published an incisive policy critique. Writing in the *New York Times*, Webb argued that the U.S. lacked a national security strategy fitting the post-Cold War era and stated an emphatic case against commitments that "cause us to fritter away our national resolve" in strategically unimportant regions. "More than ever before, the United States has become the nation of choice when crises occur," wrote Webb. "At the same time, the size and location of our military forces are in flux. It is important to make our interests known to our citizens, our allies and even our potential adversaries, not just in Bosnia but around the world. Our military must be assured that the stakes of its missions are worth dying for."³

Bosnia was my generation's first long war of murky humanitarian intervention, and it would not be the last. The Bosnia War followed what was, by comparison, an era of relative foreign policy clarity. After four decades of U.S. resistance to Soviet communism, American moral and martial power had toppled the Berlin Wall and ended the Soviet Union's existence. After seven months of painstaking coalition building, U.S. forces swept Saddam Hussein's army out of occupied Kuwait. When American soldiers skirmished in Somalia, policymakers avoided a lengthy commitment after the visuals of anarchy defeated the perceived power of humanitarianism. This disengagement policy reached a moral nadir in 1994, when U.S. diplomats in Rwanda refused to identify the Hutu slaughter of Tutsis as genocide, an ambivalence that contributed to nearly one million deaths.

Throughout 1995, Clinton Administration officials agonized over exerting U.S. power in Bosnia. Secretary of State Warren Christopher opposed U.S. military involvement in Bosnia, even as Defense Secretary William Perry and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Madeline Albright pushed for an expanded American role.⁴ "What is the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?" Albright famously asked General Colin Powell, whose caution reflected a military establishment skeptical of taking wartime orders from a commander-in-chief who had avoided the draft during Vietnam.

YOU BUILD IT, YOU OWN IT

In early 2003, with the American public still reeling from the 9/11 attacks, generals proved less inclined to question a wartime commander-in-chief who had other priorities during his generation's conflict. Although the Iraq War's stated purpose was to eliminate Saddam Hussein's theoretical weapons of mass destruction, President George W. Bush offered an additional humanitarian rationale of saving the Iraqi people from Saddam's sadistic rule. This justification took on greater political importance as the mission in Iraq changed from destroying the Iraqi Army to securing the Iraqi people. "They're going to say they are glad we created a democratic and prosperous Iraq," President Bush said in October 2003, referring to the Iraqis.⁵

Unlike President Bush, President Obama did not suggest a humanitarian rationale for his December 2009 decision to prolong the Afghanistan War with 30,000 additional troops. "It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11," President Obama said, "and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak." Although President Obama acknowledged the virtue of human rights support, he made it clear that security, not peacekeeping, drove his decision. "America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan," said the President. "I refuse to

² *Bosnia-Herzegovina: The U.S. Army's Role in Peace Enforcement Operations*, CMH Pub 70-97-1. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), p. 38.

³ James Webb, "Remember the Nixon Doctrine." *The New York Times*, November 28, 1995.

⁴ Steven L. Berg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), p. 323.

⁵ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), p. 419.

set goals that go beyond our responsibility, our means, and our interests.”⁶

President Obama, however, did not turn his Afghanistan policy into a doctrine. In 2011, Obama ordered U.S. forces to defend Benghazi from likely annihilation amidst Libya’s civil war, an action well beyond America’s responsibility, means, or interests. Like Bosnia, Administration officials split on the recommended actions, with Defense Secretary Robert Gates reluctant to intervene and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton casting the decisive vote to do so. Like Bosnia, the President would only commit U.S. forces as part of an international coalition. Like Bosnia, officials sought to limit mission creep by identifying clear achievable goals before committing military force. And, like Bosnia, mission creep happened anyway.

From Bosnia to Benghazi, unpredictability emerges as a constant theme in policy deliberations leading up to humanitarian intervention. Risk mitigation attempts lead officials to say they have “clear achievable goals,” which sound comforting but are frequently inaccurate or mistaken. Officials can calibrate strategic importance, costs, and potential effectiveness as metrics prior to military action, but their usefulness is certain to either evolve glacially (Bosnia) or shift tectonically (Iraq) once troops are on the ground. Before the Iraq War, Secretary of State Powell summarized this dictum as the Pottery Barn Rule. “You are going to be the proud owner of 25 million people,” Powell said to President Bush. “You will own all their hopes, aspirations, and problems.” You break it, you own it.⁷

The Pottery Barn Rule’s practical implications extend well beyond owning what is broken. Indeed, policymakers would be wise to apply a Home Depot Rule to deliberations and decisions on humanitarian intervention—you build it, you own it.⁸ The Home Depot Rule proved true in Bosnia, when American brokered talks concluded with the Dayton Accords, which then resulted in the U.S. bearing the peacekeeping burden. It also recently proved true in Libya, when American bombs destroyed forces loyal to Muammar Qaddafi, which then resulted in an increased diplomatic and clandestine presence once the rebels captured Tripoli.

EXPECT MISSION CREEP

In December 1995, President Clinton presented his solution to enforcing the Dayton Accords as “clear, defined, and achievable.” In reality, it was vague, abstract, and dubious. As the foundations of peace in Bosnia were built and expanded, both the force structure size and troop commitment length—and, thus, U.S. ownership—increased. Looking back, mission creep seems both unavoidable and irrelevant, but Clinton officials did not openly acknowledge this when the decision to deploy was made. The doctrinal ambiguity of humanitarian intervention—and, thus, the Home Depot Rule—remains one of Bosnia’s enduring lessons.

In March 2011, President Obama did not tell the American people to expect mission creep in Libya when he chose to intervene. On the contrary, the Obama Administration built a Libya policy on the opposite idea: clear, defined goals (protect Benghazi) that posed minimal risk of American casualties (missile attacks and no-fly zone enforcement). Libya’s fragile government remains weak today, in part because U.S. engagement also weakened following the September 11, 2012 Benghazi consulate attacks. Whether breaking or building, the responsibilities remain the same. Intervention means ownership, and ownership means risk.

Because intervention implies ownership, policymakers and citizens should not be surprised when objectives shift after U.S. force commitments. Anticipating mission creep of some type following a humanitarian intervention makes senior officials appropriately prudent when fielding compelling calls from media figures or interest groups. Planning for a mission to change does not mean the U.S. should never undertake a humanitarian effort. But it does mean policymakers should acknowledge the inherent uncertainty, challenges, and risks when presenting a case to the American people for such prospectively noble activities.

This holds especially true in today’s debates. Consider Syria, where columnists like Max Boot, who had previously advocated the Iraq War, continue to clamor for U.S. engagement. Or Congo, where actor and philanthropist Ben Affleck has illuminated the tragic, ongoing war in op-eds as well as any journalist. And certainly in Mali, where

⁶ President Barack Obama, speech transcript, December 1, 2009.

⁷ Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, p. 150. For the next two years, Pottery Barn stores protested the quote, issuing numerous press releases denying the rule’s existence because they feared scaring off potential customers.

⁸ With apologies to Lowe’s.

North African Islamist militants have enslaved thousands along their border with Algeria, creating both a human tragedy and a safe zone from which, like Afghanistan or Pakistan, terrorists could plot attacks against the United States. Each of these conflicts have as credible a justification as Bosnia once did for U.S. intervention. At the same time, each prospective intervention must be weighed against the inevitable consequences of success. Comparing the past to the present, an additional lesson from Bosnia emerges: a U.S. humanitarian foreign policy doctrine will probably never exist.

THE FUTURE OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

Will Bosnia remain peaceful? It's still too early to say. Although the United States led the initial peacekeeping mission, the European Union today retains full responsibility for preventing further bloodshed. Despite the Euro crisis, all former Yugoslavia countries have applied for EU membership, and future inclusion would increase regional stability. "Both Serbs and Croats know it will be better down the road if they are part of a unified Europe," says Aleksander Delosevic, who directs the Balkan Security Agenda, a Belgrade-based think tank. "For the Balkan countries, the EU leads to greater prosperity and peace."

Ever the German favorite, Croatia is slated to join the EU next summer, increasing pride, hope and envy throughout the Balkan states. Serbia's unresolved protest over Kosovo's separation has slowed their EU candidacy, leaving Serbs resentful and disillusioned. For its part, Bosnia has not been approved as an EU candidate, and territorial and political disputes remain from the country's internal divisions following the Dayton Accords. Dialect and script notwithstanding, Serbians, Croatians, and Bosnians speak a common language. Because of this, the past tensions and present inequities throughout the former Yugoslavia still feel like a family dispute: deep, powerful, but potentially resolvable.

In Bosnia, for now, the war is over. Both despite and because of mission creep, the U.S. humanitarian intervention helped the Bosnian people end the chaos and bloodshed. At Jasenovac and Donja Gradina, curators from the World War II concentration camps attempt to tame incendiary nationalism that fueled the violence. Perhaps someday they will do so as one museum instead of two as they search for truth and memorialize the dead.⁹

In Sarajevo, the new generation, lost but determined, hopes their collective war memories remain enough to keep the peace. They have endured both war and occupation as a common experience, and they have current memories of the American intervention. For some, these reflections bring gratitude of horrors ended. For others, these thoughts carry resentment of perceived or actual injustices endured in both war and peace.¹⁰

Before there was the possibility of peace, however, soldiers like Specialist Begosh deployed in foggy confusion for nine years, delicately navigating mined roads and hostile populations. Today, we no longer dwell upon each Iraq and Afghanistan casualty with the fervor Begosh received on New Year's Eve 1995. As a country, we barely remember we are still at war. We would do well to remain mindful of the daily risk these irreplaceable assets incur when the United States invests in humanitarian improvement, lest we forget the ultimate national consequences of enterprises, like Bosnia, which we choose to build and own.

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⁹ See "Bosnia Remembered – Part I: The Legacy of Jasenovac," *FPRI E-Notes*, December 2012.

¹⁰ See "Bosnia Remembered – Part II: The Lost Generation," *FPRI E-Notes*, December 2012.