Sarajevo demand response

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For over four years following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the onset of war, first in Croatia and then in Bosnia, the United States refused to take the lead in trying to end the violence and conflict. While many have written eloquently and passionately to explain Washington’s--and the West’s--failure to stop the ethnic cleansing, the concentration camps, and the massacres of hundreds of thousands of civilians, few have examined why, in the summer of 1995, the United States finally did take on a leadership role to end the war in Bosnia.

One notable exception is Richard Holbrooke, who recounts his own crucial contribution to the negotiation of the Dayton Peace Accords in his book To End a War. But Holbrooke’s account leaves unclear what, in addition to his own brokering role, accounts for the turnaround in U.S. policy, including the critical decision to take a leadership role in trying to end the war. It was on the basis of that decision that Holbrooke subsequently undertook his negotiating effort.

What, then, explains the Clinton administration’s decision in August 1995 at long last to intervene decisively in Bosnia? Why, when numerous previous attempts to get involved in Bosnia were half-hearted in execution and ended in failure? The answer is complex, involving explanations at two different levels. First, at the policy level, the day-to-day crisis management approach that had characterized the Clinton administration’s Bosnia strategy had lost virtually all credibility. It was clear that events on the ground and decisions in allied capitals as well as on the Capitol Hill were forcing the administration to seek an alternative to muddling through.

Second, at the level of the policy-making process, the president encouraged his national security adviser and staff to develop a far-reaching and integrated strategy for Bosni a that abandoned the incremental approach of past efforts. This process produced agreement on a bold new strategy designed to bring the Bosnia issue to a head in 1995, before presidential election politics would have a chance to intervene and instill a tendency to avoid the kind of risk-taking behavior necessary to resolve the Bosnia issue.

Betrayal in SrebrenicaAs the Bosnian Serb strategy unfolded through the spring and into summer, the 20,000-strong U.N. Protection Force in Bosnia confronted a fateful dilemma. UNPROFOR could actively oppose the Bosnian Serb effort and side with the Muslim victims of the war. But this would entail sacrificing the evenhandedness that is the hallmark of U.N. peacekeeping. Alternatively, UNPROFOR could preserve its much-vaunted neutrality and limit its role to protecting humanitarian relief supplies and agencies. But this would effectively leave the Muslims to face the Bosnian Serb assault virtually unprotected.

Yet, the Clinton administration had been here before. In early 1993 it rejected the Vance-Owen Peace Plan; in May 1993 it tried to sell a policy to lift the arms embargo and conduct air strikes while the Muslims were being armed; and in 1994 it had sought repeatedly to convince the allies to support strategic air strikes. Each

time, the new policy was rejected or shelved, and an incremental, crisis management approach was once again substituted for a viable approach to end the war.

It was a way out that the president demanded from his foreign policy team in June 1995. Spearheaded by the National Security Council staff and strongly supported by Madeleine Albright (then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations), America’s first coherent Bosnia strategy was developed. This strategy for the first time matched force and diplomacy in a way that would break the policy impasse that had strangled Washington for so long. It was debate by the president and his senior advisers over the course of three days in August and, when accepted by Clinton, became the basis for the diplomatic triumph in Dayton three months later.

Lake Pushes the Process Given the worsening atrocities in Bosnia and the growing discontent with U.S. policy, how did the administration move from its paralysis of 1994 to its constructive role in late 1995? In May ’95, Tony Lake first began to consider how U.S. policy toward Bosnia might be changed in a more productive direction. He began to meet informally with key people on his NSC staff (including his deputy, Sandy Berger, and his chief Bosnia aides Sandy Vershbow and Nelson Drew) to consider how the United States could help to change the tide of war.

It had long been clear that progress toward a negotiated settlement was possible only if the Bosnian Serbs understood that not achieving a diplomatic solution would cost them dearly. For nearly a year, the United States and its Contact Group partners (Britain, France, Germany, and Russia) had sought to pressure the Bosnian Serb leadership headquartered in Pale into agreeing to commence serious negotiations by convincing Milosevic to cut off economic and, especially, military assistance to the Bosnian Serbs. Despite being offered various incentives (including direct negotiations with the United States and the suspension of U.N. economic sanctions), Milosevic never followed through.

The Endgame StrategyGiven the State and Defense Departments’ position on this issue, Anthony Lake faced a critical choice. He could accept that there was no consensus for anything beyond continuing a policy of muddling through, or he could forge a new strategy and get the president to support a concerted effort seriously to tackle the Bosnia issue once and for all. Having for over two years accepted the need for consensus as the basis of policy and, as a consequence, failed to move the ball forward, Lake now decided that the time had come to forge his own policy initiative. He was strengthened in this determination by the president’s evident desire for a new direction.

Lake asked Vershbow to draft a strategy paper on the basis of this discussion. The national security adviser also told the president about the direction of his thinking. He specifically asked Clinton whether he should proceed along this path with the knowledge that in a presidential election year the United States would have to commit significant military force either to enforce an agreement or to bring about a change in the military balance of power on the ground. Clinton told Lake to go ahead, indicating that the status quo was no longer acceptable.

The Road to Dayton Despite considerable opposition to the endgame strategy from the State Department (with Secretary of State Warren Christopher worrying that neither Congress nor the allies would accept the military track) and the Pentagon (where many officials believed that Bosnia’s partition would prove the only viable solution), the president decided in early August to support the NSC’s position. He sent his national security adviser to persuade key European allies as well as Moscow that the new U.S. strategy was their best bet to resolve the Bosnian imbroglio. The president told Lake to make clear to the allies that he was committed to this course of action--including the military track--even if the United States was forced to implement it on its own.