

*What the West Must Do in Bosnia:*  
**An Open Letter to President Clinton (1993)**

**Albert Wohlstetter and Margaret Thatcher**

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In Bosnia, the situation goes from bad to worse. The people there are in despair about their future. They are victims of brutal aggression. But they are also the victims of the failure of the democracies to act.

Instead of opposing the acquisition of territory by force, the United Nations and the democracies have dispatched humanitarian assistance to Bosnia. But welcome as it is, this will not stop the massacres or halt the ethnic cleansing. Humanitarian aid will not protect the besieged children of Bosnia from being herded into Muslim ghettos or orphaned or maimed or slaughtered.

These could have been our children.

If we do not act, immediately and decisively, history will record that in the last decade of this century the democracies failed to heed its most unforgiving lesson: that unopposed aggression will be enlarged and repeated, that a failure of will by the democracies will strengthen and encourage those who gain territory and rule by force.

*1. Humanitarian Aid and Future Ethnic Cleansing.*

In Bosnia the democracies have used the need to deliver humanitarian aid both to excuse their own inaction and to keep the recognized multiethnic state of Bosnia outgunned and therefore itself unable to protect its civilian centers from slaughter by a dictator bent on making a Greater Serbia. Western governments now vying publicly to save several hundred maimed Bosnian children will not escape the responsibility they assumed for the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of other children and their parents, when they refused to let an independent Bosnia defend itself.

Recently, the U.N. and EC [European Community] mediators, with U.S. support, threatened to withdraw humanitarian aid in order to coerce the Bosnian government into accepting violent changes in its borders and a partition into ethnically pure states, with Bosnia a set of widely dispersed, unarmed Muslim ghettos.

But the U.N., the EC and the U.S. have continually condemned such changes and that partition as totally unacceptable. Such a partition, they've said, is unstable: It will mean still more killing, broken families, and the expulsion of millions at a time when Europe is closing its doors to refugees. If the fall of Sarajevo is a preface to a partition creating unarmed Muslim ghettos, it will be a preface also to further disasters, ethnic cleansing and instability — in Sarajevo itself and other Bosnian "safe havens" protected only by the U.N., in the rest of the Balkans, and beyond.

Bosnia, unlike Somalia, was no civil war. Like Kuwait, it was a case of clear-cut aggression against a member of the U.N. — a member whose independence the U.S., Europe and the international community have recognized for at least 16 months.

When the Baath dictatorship seized all of Kuwait in August 1990, it tried to erase Kuwaiti identity using rape, torture, the seizure of Kuwaiti passports and the forging of a new identity of Kuwait as a province of Iraq. A coalition of several NATO powers and some non-NATO countries joined the U.S. in demanding and then, in January 1991, compelling Iraq's withdrawal by using first air power throughout Iraq and then ground forces in Kuwait and southern Iraq. The coalition was exercising the right of individual and collective self-defense of each of its members and of Kuwait. It aimed at more than mitigating Kuwait's suffering. The U.N. endorsed the coalition's aim to get Iraq out of Kuwait, and the aims beyond Kuwait to reduce Iraq's power to terrorize its neighbors. But the U.N. exercised no authority over the coalition.

In the same way, the U.S. should now lead a coalition of Western governments that exercises the right of each to individual and collective self-defense. The U.N. Charter does not confer that right; it acknowledges it to be "inherent." Nor is that right conditioned on the secretary-general's approval.

The West's air-to-air fighters overflying Bosnia needed no further preparations to shoot down the command helicopters and helicopter gunships that the Serbs, in yet another blatant violation of their promises, used to drive the Bosnian army from their defenses of Sarajevo on Mounts Igman and Bjelasnica. The West could have done this without elaborate plans to coordinate air strikes against ground targets without endangering U.N. forces on the ground, and without the permission of the secretary-general, Europe's Council of Ministers, the 16 NATO ambassadors and a variety of U.N. commanders — procedures that appear designed to make the fall of Sarajevo a *fait accompli*. A disaster not only for

the Bosnians, but for the relevance of the U.N., Europe, NATO—and the U.S.

Western governments should act now substantially to reduce Serbia's immediate and future power of aggression and ultimately to put the Bosnians in a position where they won't have to rely indefinitely on the protection of the international community.

With this limited political aim, Western air power would play a much larger role, and U.S. and other Western ground forces a much smaller and more transient role, than in U.N.-directed options that look toward an indefinite future of protecting on the ground helpless Muslim ghettos and besieged corridors of supply to them. The ghettos and the corridors to them would be subject to continuing artillery, armor and sniper attacks so long as the source of these attacks in Serbia is left intact.

Air power directed against the present and future potential sources of such attack can be used selectively and discriminately. The no-fly zone could be enforced and defenses suppressed over Serbia as well as Bosnia. And a very high percentage of the military aircraft on the large airfields in Serbia could be destroyed, with minimal danger to Serbian civilians or to UNPROFOR (U.N. Protective Force) troops.

The U.N. alternatives mean a future of ethnic cleansing and endless military protection by the international community.

## 2. *Bosnia Is Not History.*

What the West says and does now in Bosnia will affect the future in Bosnia itself; in the rest of the Balkans; and in other newly independent countries that, having gained their freedom when a communist dictatorship fell apart, now find that freedom threatened by former rulers who would, like Milosevic, use the pretext of protecting minorities to retake strategic facilities and territory that their pan-national military has never been reconciled to giving up.

Even now, after 16 months of a perverse Western policy piously condemning the pan-Serbian aggressors while doing nothing to stop the massacres, the West can use military force substantially and discriminately to reduce the power of the poorly motivated and ill-disciplined Serbian Army in Bosnia and its source of support in Serbia itself. And the West can help arm the larger, highly motivated Bosnian Army that still maintains a precarious control of the towns containing most of Bosnia's industry, including its weapons industry. In this way the West can

improve the odds for the survival of a free multiethnic Bosnia.

On the other hand, if Western mediators and UNPROFOR confine unarmed Bosnian Muslims to small, purified remnants of Bosnia, the public will watch with horror as these ghettos disappear before its eyes on television while Serbs violate this ceasefire—as they have all the others for 23 months in Croatia and Bosnia. A spectacular display, at the same time, of the unshakably naive faith in Serbian promises that underlies Western cynicism. Realpolitik revealed as fantasy in real time.

Even if, like Kuwait in August 1990, all Bosnia (and not just Sarajevo) were seized, it would be essential for the democracies to make clear, as they did in the case of Kuwait, that violent border changes and ethnic cleansing will not stand, whether by Serbia in Croatia and Bosnia, or by Croatia in Bosnia.

If the West does not make that clear, it will have nothing persuasive to say to the Croats and the Serbs who have already renewed the conflict Serbia started two years ago when it used the Yugoslavian Army to seize territory in Croatia and then turned to invading Bosnia. Nor will the West be able to stop Serbian ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo and of Hungarians in Vojvodina. In Macedonia (unrecognized by either the U.S. or Europe because the Greeks object), where the U.S. and Sweden have deployed ground forces with no clear purpose, Western policy seems even murkier than for the other former Yugoslavian republics. There the West will have nothing coherent to say to resolve potential conflicts among Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, Bulgarians, Turks, and frustrated Macedonian nationalists who may topple the moderate Grigorov. Finally, the West will have nothing to say to discourage the now serious threat presented by pan-nationalists in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere.

### 3. *The Role of Force and of Empty Threats.*

Empty threats have a perverse effect.

Against a dictator who will yield only to superior force the West can threaten most ferociously in the hope that threats alone will be enough to stop aggression—that its threats and endless preparations will “send a message.” But if the West doesn’t use force at all or if it uses it symbolically rather than substantially to reduce Milosevic’s power, or if it uses force to coerce Bosnian capitulation, “the message” received will only bring American and Western resolve into contempt.

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