

Nation-Building in the Balkans:  
Impediments to a model for others

Bob Bergen

This paper is about nation-building in the post–conflict Balkans and the international community’s achievements to date. Its focus is Bosnia where there were three clear lessons learned about peace and nation-building. The first is that in a hostile environment, it is only military forces which can provide the first vestiges of humanitarian aid. But, that is not an ideal solution because it is highly desirable to have non-governmental agencies to provide such aid. Out of that comes the second lesson which is that without security provided by military force, it is not possible for non-governmental agencies to deliver humanitarian aid. The third lesson is that without *sufficient* military force, it is not possible to provide the close links required between the civilian and military components to achieve the political transformation necessary for peace or nation building.

In the challenging world of nation-building, it is often held that the experience of NATO in the Balkans – beginning with the Dayton Accord in 1995 – is a paradigm that has been ignored in Afghanistan. That working hypothesis would appear to have evolved from the *Rand Review* article “Nation-Building, The Inescapable Responsibility of the World’s Only Superpower” and the larger body of work *America’s Role in Nation Building: From Germany to Iraq*.<sup>1</sup>

One of the points that James Dobbins, the principle author of both studies, makes is that nation-building is “not principally about economic reconstruction, but rather about political transformation.”<sup>2</sup> He makes that observation noting that communal hatred, which is an impediment to nation-building, is more pronounced Bosnia and Kosovo than in Somalia, Haiti and Afghanistan. Communal hatred was not a factor in ethnically-homogenous Germany and Japan, the latter two of which were unequalled nation-building success stories.

That is what I am here to talk about today, hatred, and more specifically, the manifestations of hatred that I will show you in Bosnia about a year before the Dayton Accord – which brought about a joint nation-building effort by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – and why I think that hatred threatens the fragile stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina to this day, some 12 years after Dayton.<sup>3</sup> I was in a position to observe the manifestations of that hatred first-hand as a journalist travelling, living and working with the Canadian Forces in Bosnia in 1994 and I am able to share some of my observations with you, because I think they have a direct-bearing on the success or failure of nation building in one of the best working models to date.

I won't go into a detailed history of Yugoslavia here, because it is set out extensively elsewhere, except to explain the elements that have a bearing on this paper. Croatia declared independence from the Yugoslav federation in June 1991, followed by a vicious war in which Serbia seized certain cities and areas home to ethnic Serbs. By November 1991 both sides were ready to accept a UN peacekeeping mission UNPROFOR (U.N. Protection Force) under the Vance Plan and the establishment

demilitarized UN Protected Areas in Slavonia and the Krajinas, if only to consolidate their gains. The first Canadians were deployed to Croatia in Operation Harmony in March 1992.

Bosnia, meanwhile, declared independence in April 1992, followed by a savage civil war. A UN Security Council Resolution in September 1992 expanded UNPROFOR's mandate to protect humanitarian relief convoys in Bosnia. The first Canadians arrived in theatre in November 1992. Hostilities renewed with a Croatian offensive in January 1993 which resulted in Serbian authorities feelings of betrayal that UNPROFOR had failed to protect them. In April 1993, the UN declared the town of Srebrenica a safe area in the Canadian zone of responsibility based in Visoko 12 kilometres north of Sarajevo. Five more safe areas were later created and UNPROFOR's responsibility was expanded to allow force to deter attacks against the and protect humanitarian relief convoys.

In August 1993, the Canadian government committed 1,200 Calgary-based soldiers to duty with UNPROFOR in Croatia and Bosnia. About about 600 members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry were slated for duty in Croatia's Sector South in the Krajinas in the spring of 1994. About 800 soldiers with the Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) were put on footing for the area around Visoko, Bosnia. Another 300 soldiers with the 1 Service Battalion were to be deployed to Primosten, Croatia, on the Adriatic Coast to supply and support the Patricia's and Strathcona's.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper I was writing for at the time, the *Calgary Herald*, assigned me to cover their training and their eventually deployment.

In preparation for the assignment, I became a voracious reader of all things Yugoslavia and Croatia and Bosnia in particular. Robert Kaplan's observations in *Balkan Ghosts* that the massacre of Orthodox Serbs with knives and mallets in Croatia and the throwing Serbian Orthodox women and children off cliffs in Bosnia during the Second World looms large in the collective consciousness of Serbs. Particularly chilling is Kaplan's account of atrocities committed in Croatia:

“...if you were to say that the Croatian Ustashe (‘Insurrectionists’) murdered 700,000 Serbs at Jesenovac, a World War II death camp located sixty-five miles southeast of Zagreb, you would be recognized as a Serbian nationalist, who despised Croats as well as Albanians, who judges the late Croatian cardinal and Zagreb arch-bishop, Alojzije Stepanic, ‘a Nazi war criminal,’ and who supports Slobodan Milosevic, the rabble-rousing nationalist leader of Serbia. But if you were to say that the Ustashe fascists murdered only 60,000 Serbs, you would be pegged as a Croatian nationalist who considers Cardinal Stepanic ‘a beloved saint’ and who despises Serbs and their leader, Milosevic.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, in Croatia, a ceasefire agreement between the Croatian government and the Republic of Serb Krajina was signed March 29 and was due to be implemented April 4, coincidentally the day the Princess Patricia's advance party was to arrive at Canadian Battalion 1 (CANBAT 1) Gracac in the Serb Krajina in southern Croatia. Immediately, it became their job to establish a UN presence in a zone of separation with observation posts and patrols, to oversee mine clearance; to provide security during body, personnel or prisoner exchanges; to be involved in the recovery of mortal remains and to

co-ordinate civil engineering resources for the re-establishment of infrastructure within the zone of separation.

I arrived in Gracac on April 30, in time to document the recovery of a flimsy CANBAT 1 Iltis jeep that days before had hit a buried anti-tank mine while returning from a mine clearing operation. Company commander Lieut. Christopher Lunney suffered serious head injuries when the jeep was hit. A second soldier - Pte. Tommy Anderson - had both legs amputated and remained in stable condition in Zagreb. It was the second mishap within three weeks to hit members of D company. In the first, an M113 Armoured personnel carrier, struck an anti-tank mine resulting in very serious injuries.

Based on the records officials submitted to the Patricia's, in one particular seven-kilometre by two-kilometre zone, it was estimated there were 400,000 to 600,000 mines, according to the Patricia's commanding officer, Lt.-Col. Mike Diakow. Moreover, he explained: "The shops and stores that you and I take for granted, the provision of food and amenities in the villages have been 100 per cent destroyed." <sup>6</sup>

This, however, was just a warm-up for what was about to come: Bosnia. Kaplan's description of Bosnia, with Muslims added to the already volatile ethnic mix was even more worrisome to a foreigner contemplating travelling there in the midst of an ethnically-motivated civil war. Kaplan wrote: "...Bosnia is a morass of ethnically mixed villages in the mountains. Bosnia is rural, isolated and full of suspicions and hatreds to a degree that the sophisticated Croats of Zagreb could barely imagine. Bosnia represents an intensification of the Serb-Croat dispute." <sup>7</sup>

The first Canadians had been deployed to Bosnia in November 1992 to conduct convoy escort operations. The reason was that the Serbs, Croats and Muslims routinely ambushed aid convoys provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOS) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The situation for the residents of Bosnia was grim: a civil war was raging and ethnic cleansing was escalating, particularly in Bosnian-Serb controlled areas. Hundreds of thousands in places like the Muslim enclaves of Maglaj and Tesanj had only received food and supplies once over an eight-month period. In February 1994, Spanish UNPROFOR troops had come under regular fire and shelling trying to deliver aid to 50,000 people living in Mostar “like rats in cellars without a water supply, without electricity, without sanitation.”<sup>8</sup>

I and a photographer had arranged to travel into Bosnia with the Lord Strathcona’s Horse (Royal Canadians) by meeting up with them in Split, Croatia, on the Adriatic coast on May 5, 1994. They were to replace the 12e Régiment blindé du Canada (12 RBC) which had been in Bosnia since November, 1993. We couldn’t fly into Sarajevo because UN aircraft flying into the airport routinely came under heavy fire. Neither could we drive there in anything approaching a normal trip. Bosnia had a generally adequate transportation system before the war. During it, 2,000 kilometres of its 8,000 kilometre network of main and regional roads were severely damaged and 70 bridges, including all those connecting Bosnia to Croatia were damaged or destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, the Strathcona’s were first bused from Split into Bosnia at the Kamensko checkpoint. At Tomislavgrad, the bus trip ended. They were issued their weapons, flak jackets and helmets, boarded troop transport trucks and formed into a convoy guarded by Cougar armoured vehicles for the remainder of the 390-kilometre trip

to Visoko. The most treacherous part was a 40-kilometre stretch of dirt road carved through the mountains by British army engineers. It was barely wide enough for one vehicle, had soft shoulders, no guard rails and a sheer drop over the edge of the mountain of about 600 metres. The valley floor was littered with dozens of trucks, buses, cars and fuel tankers that couldn't turn its hairpin corners, make grades or just slipped off its soft shoulders. The UN fuel tanker I photographed had to be drained lest it provoked a gunfight among local residents desperate for its cargo. Slowing the convoy down were bottlenecks clogged at one point by 200 vehicles. It took the convoy more than an hour to cover five kilometres. This was the route by which much of the humanitarian aid entered Bosnia.

Bosnia is an absolutely beautiful country, but nestled in the mountains in Croat, Serb and Muslim villages were scenes of unimaginable destruction. The burned-out homes around Prozor were the first visible signs of ethnic cleansing. In areas British troops were responsible for around Gornju Vakuf, children playing in the rubble of homes in which they still lived waved at the convoy. In others, children begged for candy. When they didn't get any, they gave soldiers the finger, yelled unprintable obscenities in English and threw rocks. At least two youths had blow pipes out of which they fired pins and discarded syringe needles. Others tried to steal cans of gas. "It's the kids. It's the kids who it (this war) is going to affect the most," observed one soldier. "One day, they're going to grow up and be like their parents. They're going to grow up hating the people around them." <sup>10</sup>

In Visoko, the enormity of the humanitarian disaster unfolding in Bosnia was conveyed to me by the Mersed Sahinovic, vice-president of Sarajevo County even though a fragile ceasefire had been in place since April 14. Sahinovic represented about 60,000 mainly Muslim residents in an around the Visoko area. Homeless refugees, he explained, were the biggest problem facing civic officials and peacekeepers attempting to restore order in Central Bosnia. The problem was particularly severe around the Kiseljak Pocket, a 100-square-kilometre area around the town of Kiseljak, about 10 kilometres east of the Strathcona headquarters. Many Muslims fled the area where Croat extremists were still torching Muslim homes.

Mayor Mervana Hadzimirtezić of Vares, about 35 kilometres northeast of Kiseljak, told me that the refugee problem was severe in her town; that thousands of displaced Muslims from Vares who fled to Kiseljak were returning home without proper authorization. The problem, she explained, was that their homes were occupied by other refugees and they were left wandering the streets. "We don't have enough food and accommodation," she said, blaming Croats for creating the anarchy.<sup>11</sup> Remember, this was 1994. By the war's end with the Dayton Accord in 1995, about half of Bosnia's 4.4 million people would be displaced by ethnic cleansing, some 600,000 within the country and about 1,259,000 outside the country.

In addition to assisting in the delivery of humanitarian aid, the Strathcona's other unpleasant duties included facilitating prisoner exchanges and body exchanges. One particular exchange illustrated the problem of blaming one side or another for the misery of Bosnia. During it, Muslim side brought out nine Serb soldiers in coffins, laid out side

by side. Everything appeared to be going quite well. The Muslims picked up their bodies quickly without incident, but while the Serbs were confirming their bodies in the caskets and checking their names, they discovered that - of the nine soldiers - they recognized five who were captured alive by the Muslims in a previous engagement. All of them were shot in the legs. Their throats were cut and their eyes were gouged out.<sup>12</sup>

The next day, the Serbs lobbed mortar shells into Visoko and directed heavy machine gun fire into its market. Of course, it would get much worse in Bosnia than that. The massacre of more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys by Serbs at Srebrenica in July, 1995 underscores that. Reading the evidence presented in the International Court of Justice recent ruling on the Srebrenica genocide, one can not help but be sickened by the findings not only of massive non-Serbian killings, but of torture; widespread and systematic rape of women and children; camp prisoners forced to perform sexual acts with each other and sometimes guards; and sadistic beatings with wooden clubs, baseball bats, and electric cables by Serbian military and paramilitary forces.

It's my opinion that what happened in Croatia and Bosnia from 1991 to 1995 was long-suppressed retribution for the atrocities Croats, Serbs and Muslims all committed half a century earlier during the Second World War. I'd like to be an optimist, but reading the news today does not comfort me about what the far distant future holds for Bosnia. Yes, the 100,000 mostly Muslim people who died in the war is not the equivalent of the something like 700,000 Serbs who reportedly died at the Jesenovac camp during the Second World War, but 100,000 deaths is sufficient to cause hundreds of thousands of lifetime hatreds. Yes, the Dayton Accord and the Peace Implementation

Council of 55 countries and international agencies brought about a ceasefire, relative stability and boundary demarcation. Yes, there were democratic elections, but at worst they cemented elected power in the hands of ethnic cleansers. According to the Berghof Research Centre for Construction and Conflict Management, the effort to return all refugees and displaced persons to their pre-war place of residence remains a tremendous disappointment. The problem is minority return to the majority of cities which have one dominant ethnic group comprising 90 per cent of the city's population. In the Centre's estimation, even 10 years after Dayton, Bosnia remains ethnically divided, its state-level governing structures are fragile and should the international community withdraw, those structures would quickly collapse.<sup>13</sup>

Here is the worst part: the Centre is adamant that Dayton was flawed in the hope that the three warring Bosnian factions would put aside their differences, move beyond the wartime atrocities, the economic plunder and organized crime and co-operate and live together in peace and harmony in a unified state. Indeed the Serbs' nationalist goal today remains re-union with Serbia.

What lingers in my mind is the pictures I took in Bosnia that convinced me that we Canadians just don't understand hatred. Those pictures colour every news report I read that ethnic nationalism in Bosnia remains strong; perhaps too strong. I've seen its outcome. The pictures cause me concern when I read about news reports that Serbian president Milorad Dodik threatens to call a referendum on the Bosnia Serbs' entity status if Kosovo becomes independent and that Serbs in northern Kosovo would like to split Kosovo in two.<sup>14</sup> If nation-building is not principally about economic reconstruction,

but rather about political transformation, economic reconstruction has taken place in the Balkans, I can not conclude that nation-building bringing about political transformation has been a success.

As for the question whether the Balkan experience provided a positive model that was ignored in Afghanistan, certainly in terms of troop numbers alone I agree whole heartedly. When I was in Bosnia in 1994, there were 36,397 United Nation troops from 23 countries committed to helping the aid agencies.<sup>15</sup> Clearly that was not enough to prevent the war crimes at Srebrenica a year later. It was certainly not enough to stop the Serbs from violating UN safe havens and flouting UN resolutions. It certainly was not enough to halt the abuse and humiliation of UN soldiers at the hands of Serbs who overwhelmed 370 lightly armed Dutch peacekeepers – kidnapping 30 of them in the process – as they seized the Srebrenica safe haven in July 1995 and killed every Bosnian man and boy captured. They were not enough to prevent Serb gunners from establishing an arsenal on Mount Ingman west of Sarajevo and lobbing artillery and mortar shells into the city in August 1995, killing 37 and wounding 85 in the worst attack on the city since February, 1994. Even as 16 NATO ambassadors agreed on a broad outlines of a peace deal in September 2005, it took air attacks by NATO war planes and cruise missiles on Serb ammunition dumps, anti-aircraft and radar sites and command-and-control installations to convince the Serbs to withdraw 300 heavy weapons out of a 20-kilometre zone around Sarajevo. After the Dayton Accord in November 1995, the international community eventually responded to the Accord by providing a total of some 60,000 troops to Bosnia to enforce it. That robust military presence brought about a ceasefire that began what progress has been made there to date.

Another lesson Bosnia teaches is that peace and nation-building takes not only determination but patience and time. It has now been 12 years since the Dayton Accord, yet the International Crisis Group recently warned that should the international community abandon Bosnia now, particularly with the approach of the Kosovo status decision, its survival as a unified state remains in doubt. There is just no quick fix in nation-building.

Having said that, the lessons learned in Bosnia have relevance to day. Were the international community's military numbers replicated in Afghanistan on a per capita basis, by my calculation, there would be some 476,935 international troops available to secure the country and protect it from the return of the Taliban and its al-Qaeda supporters, not the 37,000 there presently. In absence of an overwhelming military presence to consolidate and hold NATO gains against the Taliban and other insurgents, the country remains at war and provides few similarities to the peace-building efforts which took place in post-conflict Bosnia. There is also another side to this coin, which I have not addressed but which is critical: aid. In Bosnia, the international community contributed 26 times more humanitarian aid, reconstruction and reform money in the first two years than it did in Afghanistan.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, Bosnia showed that, despite the difficulties that remain today, if overwhelming military force is brought to bear, peace and nation building will have far greater chance of success than will something less. In the end, Bosnia showed that it is only military force which can create the stability needed for non-governmental agencies to work safely and effectively. In the end, Bosnia showed that it is only military force

that can set the stage for political transformation. And, in the end, Bosnia showed that while military force can't bring an end to contain hatred and mistrust it can contain it and, in doing so, create the conditions necessary for peace and nation-building.

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<sup>1</sup> Dobbins, James. "Nation-Building: The Inescapable Responsibility of the World's Only Superpower." *Rand Review*. Summer 2003. Vol. 27, No. 2. pp. 17-27; Dobbins, James et. al. *America's Role in Nation-Building: from German to Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Dobbins. "Nation-Building". P. 23.

<sup>3</sup> "ICG: New International engagement strategy needed for BiH." SETimes, February 16, 2007. From the Internet <http://www.setimes.com> [Accessed February 23, 2007]

<sup>4</sup> Bergen, Bob. "City troops gearing up for UN duty." *Calgary Herald*. August 25, 1993. p. A1.

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, Robert D. *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Bergen, Bob. "Mind-boggling task: Soldiers trying to bring peace to a war-torn nation." *Calgary Herald*. May 1, 1994, p. A 10.

<sup>7</sup> Op. Cit. Kaplan. p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Office of the Special Envoy for former Yugoslavia. "Information Notes on former Yugoslavia. No. 3/94. March 1994,

<sup>9</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina: *From Recovery to Sustainable Growth* (Washington: The World Bank, 1997) P. 92.

<sup>10</sup> Bergen, Bob. "Into the War Zone." *Calgary Herald*. May 7, 1994. p. B1.

<sup>11</sup> Bergen, Bob. "Learning the rules of the game." *Calgary Herald*. May 8, 1994. p. A8.

<sup>12</sup> Bergen, Bob. "Mutilated bodies shock city soldier." *Calgary Herald*. May 17, 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Lyon, James. "Overcoming Ethnic Politics in Bosnia? Achievements and Obstacles to European Integration." pp. 49-68. In *Ten Years After Dayton*. Fischer, Martina, ed. (Berlin: Berghof Research Centre of Constructive Conflict Management, 2006)

<sup>14</sup> "NATO Pledges to Stand Firm on Kosovo." *The New York Times*. February 25, 2007. p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations. Division of Information, Zagreb HQ. "UNPROFOR News." April, 1994; UNPROFOR Fact Sheet. 13 April 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Fraser, Derek. "Afghanistan: The Realities of Peace-Building in a Failed State." Address to the Canadian Club, Regina. September 15, 2006.