Hateful Neighbors

By John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera

A survey conducted in July by the United States Information Agency highlights these divisions throughout Bosnia. Ninety-five percent of Bosnian Serbs said that their "future lies more with Serbia than Bosnia," and 88 percent of Bosnian Croats believe that their "future lies more with Croatia than Bosnia." Only the Muslims (97 percent) said that Bosnia should not be partitioned. When asked whether "a united Bosnia is a cause worth dying for," 65 percent of Bosnian Muslims answered yes, while 56 percent of Bosnian Croats and 81 percent of Bosnian Serbs answered no.

Thus two of Bosnia's three communities want out, and the Muslim endorsement of unification is not encouraging, since it assumes that a unified Bosnia would be Muslim-dominated. Bosnian Muslims, who elected Alija Izetbegovic to the three-man presidency, have proved unwilling to live together with Serbs and Croats on equal terms. Instead, they relentlessly discriminate against Serb and Croat residents of the currently Muslim zone.

The violence of the war that began in 1992 has magnified hatreds and fears that were already strong enough to tear Bosnia apart. All sides now want vengence for the wartime cruelties of the others; none show contrition. In lieu of offering regrets, for example, Serbs in Srebrenica held a horrifying demonstration last summer, on the first anniversary of their mass murder of 8,000 Muslims. The war has also shown fears that make cohabitation impossible. Minority populations everywhere now know from experience that their neighbors may become their killers. No community can function amid such terror.

Finally, the American effort to keep Bosnia intact is an imprudent departure from a past policy of laissez-faire toward crumbling states. Partition in Bosnia is unavoidable. There are only three scenarios for Bosnia's future:

- The United States could stand in the way of a Bosnian unification and the timetable for withdrawing American forces, but the United States is not sure to reignite. Bosnia's partition will be shaped by a bloody decision of arms; borders will be adjusted and minority populations transferred by terror, murder and rape. The Croats and Serbs may combine against the Muslims, who will face further massacres and might end up stateless.

- The United States could maintain Dayton but defer troop withdrawal, hoping to prevent disasters, but this would be a disaster itself: America cannot afford to be permanent baby sitter for the world's angry nationalities, and the American public will never allow it.

- The United States can abandon Dayton and move to organize a peaceful three-way partition of Bosnia. Creating a viable Muslim state is the main goal. Toward that end, current communal boundaries must be redrawn to give the Muslims more territory and to enclose most Muslims in a contiguous state with defensible borders. The Muslims should be asked to cede their Gorazda enclave in eastern Bosnia to the Serbs; the Serbs and Croats should be asked to cede large sections of western Bosnia to the Muslims.

The United States must equip and train the Bosnian Muslim army to defend the new state; America should also oversee the transfer of minorities trapped by partition boundaries. A registry should record property losses, and compensation for losses. Economic aid should be offered to help those transferred to start new lives.

The partition of Bosnia would have been easier before the Dayton agreement, which solidified and legitimized the existing boundaries, but it remains feasible today. It requires a made-in-Washington plan that uses both carrots and sticks. (Among the sticks must be a threat to arms the opponents of any who reject the plan.) With these inducements, all three groups will accept an American version of a breakup that most Bosnians desire in principle.

Bosnia will be divided one way or another. Only the final outcome and property, remains in doubt. The cost largely depends on whether the United States finally stops chasing the chimera of Bosnian unity and simply leads the process of partition.

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Many multistate states and empires have disintegrated over the past century without United States interference or major harm to American interests. The Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires expired after World War I; the great European empires declined after 1945; later Pakistan, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia and Yugoslavia followed suit.

These collapse reflect the vast power of modern nationalism, a force that overwhelm other political currents. In each case the United States wisely let nature take its course and avoided putting itself crosswise to nationalism's roaring current. President Clinton's policy of resisting nationalism in Bosnia is an experiment doomed to failure by the strength of the nationalist forces it seeks to contain. It puts America on the wrong side of history.

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