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The Only Exit From Bosnia

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The Clinton Administration has gotten itself into a real pickle in Bosnia. Congress wants American troops out by June 1998, but the Clinton team has no exit strategy. Indeed, its current policy of keeping Bosnia together guarantees an endless American military commitment. Congress will eventually compel a withdrawal -- whether in 1998 or later -- because the United States cannot keep troops in Bosnia forever. But war will erupt again when we leave, bringing vast harm to Bosnia and jeopardizing American policy in Europe.

The Administration can avoid this disaster only by dropping its current policy and moving now to organize the peaceful partition of Bosnia. Only a managed partition can let the United States leave without triggering a new war.

American forces are stuck in Bosnia because they are there to carry out an untenable accord, the 1995 Dayton agreement. That agreement calls for unifying Bosnia's three hate-filled ethnic groups in a single state. But that goal is infeasible. The Croats and the Serbs want no part of a multi-ethnic Bosnia -- that is why they fought the war in the first place. They want partition. Even the Muslims, who favored integration only because they would dominate a united Bosnia, now talk openly of partition.

Dayton's failure was predictable. History records no instance where ethnic groups have agreed to share power in a democracy after a large-scale ethnic civil war. Such wars end only with a dictatorship that restores order by the knout, or with partition. The democratic power-sharing that Dayton envisions has no precedent.

The Clinton team maintains that the Dayton accord is being put into effect, albeit slowly. Richard Holbrooke, the architect of Dayton, sees "significant signs of progress," while Samuel Berger, the President's national security adviser, maintains that "peace is beginning to take root." However, these assessments are based on theology, not the facts on the ground.

Dayton promised to return refugees to their homes and to build central Bosnian political institutions. Unfortunately, we see complete failure on both counts. Of the roughly 2.1 million Bosnians forced from their homes during the war, some 300,000 have returned home since the Dayton accord was struck. However, less than 30,000 of these have returned to homes in areas where they are part of a minority group. At the same time, about 80,000 more Bosnians have left their homes since Dayton, because the boundaries it established made them minorities where they lived. Thus 50,000 fewer Bosnians live in

integrated communities after Dayton than did before the accord. Refugees are moving, but in the wrong direction.

Similarly, the effort to create multi-ethnic political institutions has been stillborn. The Croat-Muslim Federation, which is supposed to be running half of the country, is a sham. The Bosnian Croats have effectively joined Croatia proper, while largely refusing to cooperate with their Muslim partners. The Serbs likewise remain firmly committed to partition, refusing to cooperate with efforts to create a central Bosnian authority.

The Administration hopes to turn the Serbs in favor of Dayton by backing Biljana Plavsic against its arch-nemesis, Radovan Karadzic. But Ms. Plavsic is hardly the leader to guide the Bosnian Serbs into a united Bosnia. Rather, she is an extreme Serb nationalist who holds hateful views about Muslims and was a fervent supporter of ethnic cleansing. She condemned the Dayton accord when it was signed in 1995, and her newfound support for Dayton is paper thin.

Meanwhile, relations between American soldiers and Bosnian Serbs have deteriorated to the point where violence is a live possibility. Most Serbs now view the Americans and the rest of the NATO troops as an occupation force bent on punishing them unfairly. This new animus stems from NATO's recent efforts to arrest Serbian war criminals, disarm Serbian paramilitary forces and seize police and radio stations on Ms. Plavsic's behalf. Fortunately, no Americans have been killed. But there is a sense of danger among the troops. This development bodes ill for a prolonged American stay in Bosnia, especially since there will be continuing pressure on NATO to act aggressively to try to make Dayton work.

The problem in Bosnia is not that progress has been slow, but that it has been virtually nonexistent. The Clinton team nevertheless argues for staying the course, now suggesting that troops might have to stay in Bosnia well beyond June to bring Dayton to a successful conclusion.

Such a policy is bound to prove domestically unsustainable. Opposition to President Clinton's position is clearly growing, as is pressure to remove American troops sooner rather than later. Last June, a House bill to stop financing the troops after December 1997 was only narrowly defeated, and a similar bill with a June 1998 deadline passed overwhelmingly. In July, the Senate passed a nonbinding resolution calling for a complete troop withdrawal by June 1998. Calls for withdrawal are appearing in growing numbers on editorial pages.

So the wheels are coming off the policy. The final straw could take several forms. Some American troops could fall to a terrorist attack, or in a firefight like the one in Somalia. Or Congress could cut off financing for the troops after June. But even if it allows yet another extension, it will surely be a short one, and the last one. So American forces have no long-term future in Bosnia. Nor do the forces of our NATO allies, since they have promised to follow us out the door.

The Administration needs a new policy before the current one collapses. There is still time to pursue the best alternative, a three-way partition of Bosnia. Such a solution requires active American involvement. The United States must design the partition and stand willing to subsidize and oversee it. Large population transfers must be organized and assisted. American pressure on the parties will be required to secure their agreement, since none can be given all they want. But at least such a partition might allow an American withdrawal without starting a new war.

The alternative -- clinging to Dayton until its inevitable implosion -- would have high costs for both Bosnians and Americans. A savage new war would be bound to erupt soon after the departure of American troops. New ethnic cleansing would be likely. Croatia and Serbia might join forces and divide Bosnia between them, suppressing the Muslims by force and leaving them stateless.

And American prestige would suffer the effects of an abject policy collapse. Recrimination and blame games would erupt among the NATO powers. Indeed, the Clinton Administration's plan to expand NATO would probably be a casualty of a second Bosnian war. After all, if NATO could not shut down the war in Bosnia, how could it be expected to maintain peace in the heart of Europe?

Partition is an ugly answer to the Bosnian question, but far better than the violent breakdown of Dayton that otherwise lies ahead.