

## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST COLD WAR ERA —

### Dayton Peace Accords

by Tim Walton

Intelligence can make a difference in dramatic incidents, such the takedown of Bin Laden or Pearl Harbor; but its contributions can come also through low-key, wide-ranging, and long-term efforts. An example of this is the U.S. government's efforts to deal with the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, culminating in the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords.

Starting in the summer of 1991, and for most of the following decade, Yugoslavia was wracked by violence as the various ethnic groups fought among themselves and the country disintegrated. Initially the U.S. government was not deeply engaged with this problem. Officials in the administration of President George H. W. Bush were preoccupied with strategically more significant crises, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the reunification of Germany. The American government left the handling of the fighting in the former Yugoslavia to the United Nations (UN) and what was then called the European Community (EC). These two international organizations tried various measures, including humanitarian aid, economic

sanctions, and peacekeepers; but they were unable to stop the conflict.

As time went on, the fighting, especially in Bosnia, continued and became the most destructive conflict in Europe since World War II. Over 100,000 died; and half of the Bosnian population—some 2,000,000 people—became displaced within Bosnia or refugees in other countries. There was also massive damage to infrastructure, industry, and private property.

Retrospectives on how the U.S. government became more engaged are often preoccupied with other aspects of the process and conscious of the sensitive nature of intelligence; and they make only occasional references to the role of intelligence. For example, in his memoir, *To End a War*, Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, only mentioned intelligence a handful of

times: sometimes to note analytic misjudgments, other times to acknowledge useful support.<sup>1</sup> One of his most detailed references to intelligence is about how impressed both the Americans and the various Balkans leaders were with American mapping technology made available at Dayton, which enabled the negotiators to see how various scenarios for dividing up territory might work.<sup>2</sup> Madeleine Albright, American Ambassador to the United Nations at the time, recalled how helpful overhead imagery of ethnic cleansing was in getting the United Nations to demand Red Cross access to Srebrenica, the scene of



CIA map showing the ethnic make-up of Yugoslavia. CIA maps of the Balkans in the 1990s were the standard geographic references at the time and were widely used by diplomats, military planners, and others.

a suspected massacre.<sup>3</sup>

1. Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), pp. 62, 73, 159, 194-195, 211, 319.
2. Holbrooke, pp. 283-285. For an explanation of how geospatial intelligence was used at Dayton see Dr. Gary Weir, "The Evolution of Geospatial Intelligence and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency," *AFIO's Guide to the Study of Intelligence*, Falls Church, VA: Association of Former Intelligence Officers, 2016, pp. 229-240. Also at <https://www.afio.com/publications/Guide/index.html?page=290>. Weir is the chief historian of NGA.
3. Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), p. 188.

Recently declassified documents have revealed more regarding the role of intelligence. In June of 1992, as it became obvious that the crisis would be serious and with no clear ending in sight, the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) established the Interagency Balkan Task Force (colloquially known as the BTF), combining the resources of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) with those of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and other components of the U.S. Intelligence Community. The BTF brought together analysts in a number of fields, including political, military, economic, geographic, and humanitarian expertise, among others. Over time, the BTF became the largest single analytic unit at CIA, with dozens of personnel working on the various aspects of the issue. Because of the many requests for support to the task force, and the fact that the Balkans was six time zones ahead of Washington, the BTF became a 24/7 operation. To make the work of the task force as fast and flexible as possible, it had an extremely short chain of command: its chief reported directly to the DCI, who was George Tenet at the time. Once the BTF's value became apparent, its work was regularly supported by supplementary appropriations from Congress, often several million dollars a year.

Another characteristic of the BTF was the intensity of its work. Anyone who thinks that being an intelligence analyst is easy, desk-bound work, should consider James Lewek. Jim was one of the BTF's economic analysts, and in April 1996 he was on a delegation with Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown that was trying to promote investment in the Balkans that would reinforce the peace agreed to at Dayton. The delegation's plane crashed while attempting to land near Dubrovnik, Croatia, and all aboard—including Jim—were killed. He is one of the stars on the wall in the lobby of CIA headquarters commemorating those who have died in the line of duty. Other American officials would also die trying to bring peace to the Balkans.

Many of the declassified documents include those used at the Principals and Deputies Committee meetings.<sup>4</sup> (The Deputies are the deputy secretaries of the main departments of the American government—State, Defense, Treasury, etc.—and at their

meetings they try to better understand how problems will impact the interests of the United States.) Once issues have been identified and clarified, the Deputies pass on recommendation to the Principals, the cabinet-level heads of the department. The Principals try to reconcile departmental differences and formulate options for the President.

Traditionally, at these meetings the CIA representative starts the session by giving an intelligence assessment, covering issues such as what is currently known about the situation, gaps in collection, and likely outcomes. The documents demonstrate that the CIA was a respected partner in top-level decision making, commenting on a wide variety of political, military, and economic topics, among others. If the intelligence aspects were already well known, the meeting might start without a briefing by the CIA representative. Normally the CIA officer does not participate in the decision-making discussion that follows; but he or she remains in the room to answer questions and receive requests for further data or analysis.

The documents show that BTF participated in a variety of other tasks beyond staff work (written assessments, maps, oral briefings, etc.) for foreign policy decision-making, including briefing Congress and sponsoring conferences of experts.

It is also quite clear from the documents that CIA analysts were not always right, and their customers did not always agree with their assessments. As Holbrooke noted, BTF concerns that the Croatian offensive in the spring and summer of 1995 would prompt Serbian intervention in time proved to be unfounded.<sup>5</sup> Most spectacularly—making the classically faulty analytic assumption that the future would more or less resemble the past—the BTF assessed in July 1995 that a negotiated settlement was unlikely. Although generally pleased with intelligence support, U.S. leaders did complain from time to time that there was not enough clandestine collection on important issues.

Over the spring and summer of 1995, the situation in Bosnia changed on a number of fronts:

- The Muslim and Croatian forces pushed back the Bosnian Serbs.
- The Bosnian Serbs seized the UN “safe areas” of Srebrenica and Zepa, killing some 7,000 men after occupying the former.
- The shelling of an open-air market in Sarajevo killed dozens of civilians.

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4. Central Intelligence Agency, *Bosnia, Intelligence, and the Clinton Presidency* (Washington, DC, 2013) Document collection available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/collection/bosnia-intelligence-and-clinton-presidency>. Also, summary brochure: Clinton, W. J., *Bosnia, Intelligence, and the Clinton Presidency* (Little Rock, AK: William J. Clinton Presidential Library, 2013); [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/international-relations/bosnia-intelligence-and-the-clinton-presidency/Clinton\\_Bosnia\\_Booklet.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/international-relations/bosnia-intelligence-and-the-clinton-presidency/Clinton_Bosnia_Booklet.pdf).

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5. Holbrooke, pp. 62, 73, 159.



- NATO started a much more serious campaign of airstrikes.
- The war crimes tribunal in The Hague indicted senior Bosnian Serbs civilian and military leaders.

tive, led by Holbrooke to try to take advantage of the changing situation on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

Another development that motivated American officials to do everything possible to end the war was the loss of three of their colleagues. On August 19,

while trying to get into Sarajevo as part of the new diplomatic initiative, Nelson Drew, a US Air Force colonel on the staff of the National Security Council, Robert Frasure, a career diplomat, and Joseph Kruzell, an academic who was serving as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, died in a traffic accident on the road into the Bosnian capital.<sup>7</sup> After the funerals of the three officials, Holbrooke added new members to his team and continued to push for a diplomatic settlement. Officials throughout the government, including the Intelligence Community,

were determined to show that their colleagues had not died in vain.

By September and October all of these factors had brought considerable improvement, including an end to siege of Sarajevo, agreement on a framework for peace talks, and a ceasefire that, unlike so many earlier ones, actually held.<sup>8</sup>

In early November the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia gathered at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, outside Dayton, Ohio, to work on a settlement. Over the next three weeks they hammered out the Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the fighting (clearing the way for more humanitarian

aid), lifted economic sanctions, and established a decentralized political structure based largely on ethnicity. The Dayton agreement had little concrete to say about immediately punishing war criminals or



Declassified satellite imagery of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia.

BTF coverage of these events demonstrated the urgency of stopping the fight, and that leverage against the Serbs was available and was working. In August President Clinton approved a new diplomatic initia-

6. Holbrooke, 1999, pp. 73-75.

7. Albright, p. 190; Holbrooke, pp. 9-18.

8. Albright, p. 191; Holbrooke, pp. 112-198.



August 21, 1995: President Clinton holding an impromptu meeting with the government and negotiating team following a ceremony at Fort Myer, Virginia honoring three U.S. negotiators who died while traveling to Sarajevo.  
(Credit: William J. Clinton Presidential Library)

facilitating the return of refugees and the displaced—the factors that had originally prompted U.S. concern. Although imperfect, the settlement still holds.

The compromises made at Dayton were policy decisions made on the basis of factors much wider than intelligence. Holbrooke and others involved in the process believed the trade-offs were worthwhile, while acknowledging that some mistakes, such as allowing the Bosnian Serbs to retain independent armed forces, were made.

The evolution of U.S. government policy toward Bosnia, and negotiating the Dayton agreement, showed how intelligence can make a difference.<sup>9</sup> To be effective, such support has to be wide-ranging in nature (military, political, economic, etc.), and there has to be significant resources, such as people, equipment, and money, devoted to intelligence. For effective support, intelligence officers have to abide by their core professional values, including, objectivity, expertise, and persistence, among others. There also has to be realistic expectations on the part of policy makers:

intelligence will not be able to anticipate every event, answer every question, or be accurate in every answer.

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9. For a broader international perspective, see Cees Wiebes, *Intelligence and the War in Bosnia* (Munster: LIT Verlag, 2003).