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On the Brink—Again

Yugoslavia has been on the brink of disaster for many months. Yet the crisis still hasn't developed into full-scale civil war for the reason that almost nobody really wants war. Although everyone is assuming a very military posture, the general consensus among Yugoslavs is that war is the last thing they want. It's something that's been forced on them by very selfish politicians on all sides who have used nationalist tensions between the republics to get and keep power.

Probably only a minimal proportion of the population of Serbia wants war. Chief among them are the hardline nationalists and the communists, both of whom know that's the only way they can stay in power. The Croatian government's control of the media and public opinion is quite as firm as was that of the communists; maybe even worse. And Croatian President Tudjman is building a cult of personality around himself which would have done Tito proud.

The essence of the current events is not that it is an ethnic struggle between Serbs and Croats, but an ideological struggle between the remnants of a Bolshevik class and anti-communist forces, some of which are very nationalistic, and a few of which are even fascist. Having said that, there's no doubt that the Croats and the Slovenes are light years ahead of the Serbs in their commitment to building a new democratic state.

By now the (non-elected) federal government has become an irrelevancy. There is now talk of having elections throughout Yugoslavia for the federal parliament, but it's a year and a half too late; few in northern Yugoslavia would take such a process seriously now. The only federal institution that has any possibility of being reactivated in the short term is the collective presidency. Because the presidency is technically the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, it has quite strong constitutional powers.

However, the Slovenes have said that they will only send their representative to the collective presidency if the topic for discussion is the break-up of Yugoslavia.

In the recent peace talks between Croatia and Slovenia and the federal government the army was included virtually as a separate player in its own right, which is a fairly clear admission that it is not now under civilian control. Their objective is to maintain Yugoslavia as a socialist, centralised state. But increasingly that means they're in effect defending Serbia, because the bulk of the officer class is Serbian and there have been huge desertions of Croats, Slovenes, Muslims and Albanians. There has also been a purge within the military leadership of non-Serbs, partly as a consequence, of course, of the fact that they wouldn't fight aggressively in the invasion of Slovenia.

The West has to bear a certain amount of responsibility for that invasion. I myself would see a direct correlation between James Baker's visit to Belgrade prior to the crisis, his absurd comments about the need to maintain Yugoslavia as a single state, and the invasion a few days later. I believe that led the generals to believe that the West would, if not support, at least not oppose, the forcible reintegration of Yugoslavia as a single state. You could draw a fairly close parallel with the signals the US sent to Iraq before the invasion of Kuwait.

Now Western countries have finally realised that they've got themselves

into an absolutely absurd position. In order to support the maintenance of a unified Yugoslavia, they've been supporting a hardline communist regime against relatively democratic forces. The view in the West has traditionally been that Yugoslavia had to be kept together because if it was allowed to break up then the result would be not only civil war, but also the destabilising of the whole of central and eastern Europe as well as the Soviet Union—which is Yugoslavia writ large.

Now, belatedly, the West is beginning to understand that they have to make clear to the Yugoslav government that if the negotiations fail, they are willing to allow the peaceful disintegration of Yugoslavia. The creation of a few new mini-states in the Balkans may be the only way out of the impasse. But this would be a dangerous precedent, of course, because if you allow Croatia and Slovenia to go, then others will be queuing up—Slovakia, Kosovo, the Ukraine, Byelorussia, the Baltic states, Bessarabia and so on. That's what Western diplomats are scared of now because the possible end result is 20 or 30 new countries in Europe as a result of the secession of these two small republics.

At the moment the feeling in Yugoslavia is that there may well be a very bloody conflict very soon, most likely instigated by the army. Such a conflict would probably take place in eastern Croatia or northern Bosnia where there are large Serb and Croat populations side by side. The tension is so high, and the stakes are now so high that, without some form of conflict, there appears to be no way out. There have been talks now for months and months, there have been meetings and summits and ultimate summits, emergency summits, rotating summits, but they've all achieved nothing, because nobody is really prepared to negotiate. It looks as though blood is going to have to be spilt before the situation is resolved. It may be that there's just no other mechanism to get Yugoslavia out of this spiral of confrontation.

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