There were two alternative ways in which the old Yugoslavia could have been successfully divided up. The first option was to accept the 1945 borders between the six republics (including the 1974 borders for the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo) and enforce them strongly while, at the same time, guaranteeing minority rights within those areas.

The other possibility was to throw out completely the old map of Yugoslavia and start afresh, looking at the populations existing in their territory. Then, in a series of referenda, local populations could have been allowed to make their own decisions on where to draw the borders. This would have been a more complicated option—particularly in Bosnia which, as we’re seeing now, is almost impossible to divide into clear, self-contained ethnic zones. The crucial point is that whichever of these two options was chosen, it had to be applied consistently throughout the entire territory.

A major problem with the world response to the Yugoslav breakup is that the international community has tended to vacillate between those two options. On the one hand it has maintained that it won’t allow any changes of border by force. On the other, it has left open the possibility of changes of border by setting up UN protection zones within Croatia. This gave Serbs in those regions reason to believe that they might at a later stage be allowed to leave Croatia.

The other thing for which the international community has been rightly criticised is its slowness to act. In understanding the tardiness of the international community’s response, it’s important to remember that Yugoslavia was part of that huge amorphous mass of territory until recently called the Eastern bloc. In this context, it’s understandable, although regrettable, that the world community wasn’t prepared to do anything concrete to solve the Yugoslav crisis while the Soviet Union was still in being. Western countries were petrified that any decisions they took in Yugoslavia would be seen as precedents for the breakup of the Soviet Union. Following the coup in Moscow there was a clear change of policy on the part of the world community.

Even taking that into account, however, there have been numerous points at which the world community could have said ‘enough’. It has been clear to people who live here that Yugoslavia has been in the process of disintegration for a long time—essentially since the death of Tito, but particularly since 1986-88, when the Communist Party began to lose its influence within society. It was then, too, that Slobodan Milosevic began his move to seize power in Serbia, and to pull together the Serbian enclaves which previously had been semi-independent.

Milosevic’s first step on this path was to take away Kosovo’s autonomy by force. That ought to have been the first signal that something was amiss. This was followed by a protracted period of shadow-boxing. Croatia and Slovenia were seeking a new Yugoslavia conceived as a loose association of independent states; Serbia and Montenegro insisted on simply modernising the federation; while Bosnia and Macedonia were somewhere in the middle. Again, it was clear that this situation was not tenable in the long-term. That was the second point at which the world community could have moved in and offered to help resolve the problem.

Even once the war had started, the world community could immediately have provided what they provided for the Kurds—that is, an air umbrella over the territory of former Yugoslavia to prevent Yugoslav air attacks. That would have had a tremendous effect on the war because the major advantage of the Serbian forces isn’t in tanks and heavy artillery, but in the air. Without that advantage the war would have been much more even, and probably would have been resolved much more quickly.

The world community also made the fatal mistake right at the beginning of the war of imposing an arms embargo on the territory of former Yugoslavia. This was intended to help the situation. In fact, it simply forced the republics that wanted to leave Yugoslavia to fight with one hand tied behind their backs. They didn’t have sufficient weaponry, and found it very difficult to get any, while the Serbs inherited one of the largest armies in Europe.

Thus far, its actions have been ineffective. However, there has now been a fundamental and encouraging change in the world community’s response to the conflict. As recently as December, when the Serbs were bombing the living daylights out of Dubrovnik, the world community’s response was basically to throw its hands in the air in helplessness. Now, seven months later, they have moved decisively in the UN. Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia have been introduced as full members, while Yugoslavia runs the risk of losing its position in that body.

The Security Council vote in favour of sanctions in June was particularly surprising in its decisiveness. Serbia, for one, was absolutely flabbergasted that the Russians supported the motion. The Russians, because of their historic links with the Serbs, were
always anxious to give them one last chance. However, the morning after the Russian foreign minister, Kozyrev, had negotiated a ceasefire in Bosnia-Hercegovina, the Serbs launched their appalling attack on a bread queue in Sarajevo—an event which was relayed by satellite around the world. That made the Russian position look very foolish, and it prompted them finally to dissociate themselves from the Serbs. That, in turn, facilitated the creation of the coalition which the Americans needed in order to impose sanctions.

The Russians and Americans now both support further action by the UN. Many people seem to think that UN intervention has to follow the model of Desert Storm. I would argue that, on the contrary, the appropriate model is rather the first half of Desert Storm—Desert Shield. It's totally unrealistic, especially in an American election year, to expect the world community to gather a sizeable force of ground troops to restore order in Yugoslavia. Even if they were able to do so, they would very quickly find themselves in a quagmire. However, a great deal can be done without the need for a large number of UN troops.

Among the possible options are a total blockade of Montenegrin ports to block transport up and down the Danube; the closure of oil pipelines into Serbia; a complete ban on all air activity over the territory of Serbia and Montenegro; and, if necessary, selective military bombardment of strategic targets in Serbia itself. In Bosnia it may be necessary to take control of the airport and the area around Sarajevo. None of this would be easy, but the point is that there is a great deal the world community can do to help the people of Sarajevo short of direct military intervention.

Regardless of the precise measures imposed, the dilemma of Yugoslavia will have to end where it began. Milosevic came to power on the street; ultimately, I believe, he will lose power there, too. If he does, it will be as a result of his inability to keep control in Kosovo, and to stabilise the economy. Here the UN sanctions are important; if they are fully imposed they will have a catastrophic effect on the Serbian economy. There's no doubt that a great many Serbs never really wanted the war. It's no accident that tens of thousands of young men who refused to obey mobilisation call-ups are now living outside Serbia. This could rebound on Milosevic.

Unfortunately, Serbian public opinion is very poorly informed because of the ruthless propaganda machine which aims to manipulate Serbian popular opinion. The Croatian media, it should be said, is not much better in this regard, though it does allow a slightly wider range of views than in Serbia. This lack of information helps to explain why the bulk of the Serbian public is confused. For a year and a half they have been told that they are fighting a war against fascism. Then, suddenly, their political leadership and their media commentators have to inform them that by 13 votes to nil, the rest of the world—including Serbia's great ally Russia—has voted to impose the most draconian UN sanctions on any state since World War Two.

Milosevic's overwhelming control of the media also makes it difficult to be certain how much of the ethnic hostility evident in Serbia is a genuine legacy of old hatreds, and how much has been manufactured in recent times. There has been horrible savagery in this territory for centuries, and a lot of old scores have never been settled. The Nazi-controlled Croatian Ustasha regime inflicted horrible suffering on Serbs, Gypsies and in World War Two and Serbian Chetniks and Nazi quislings did their fair share of killing as well. And there was another wave of killings in the period immediately after the war when the communists engaged in a fairly thorough cleansing operation against those they defined as Croat fascists.

So there is a considerable body of hatred based in history. But then came 50 years of Titoism. And it is fair to say that over that period, while the hatreds continued under the surface, there was a remarkable change in the relationships between the various ethnic communities. In Bosnia and Croatia there was a high degree of intermarriage, and great efforts were made to break down historical ethnic tensions.

It was perhaps inevitable that both Milosevic and Croatian president Tudjman would use the ghosts of the past to help them obtain and keep power. The more important question is, if these old hatreds were so fierce, how were they kept under the surface for so long? Was it simply the omnipresence of Tito's secret police and the army, or had some genuine conciliation been made by all of the peoples of former Yugoslavia? While many people like to believe that their own feuds are very special, in reality ethnic rivalry is usually secondary in international relations. The English and the French have hated one another for centuries yet Britain and France coexist peacefully in the EC. The French and the Germans have fought countless wars, yet they have now formed a joint army. Historic hatreds can be put aside. Indeed, I would argue that in the former Yugoslavia, to a large degree they had been put aside.

So there is no inevitability about the continuation of ethnic violence and hatred in the old Yugoslavia. However, I fear that even if some sort of peace is imposed, low-level conflict at least will continue for a long time. Too many people in the old Yugoslavia now have the smell of gunpowder in their nostrils, and too many people have benefited from the war—the black marketers, the local warlords and the looters on all sides.

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