

TESTING TIME IN BOSNIA

For the first time in more than a year, the prospects for a successful, lasting, and even a relatively just peace in Bosnia have improved. In recent weeks, one indicted war criminal was captured by NATO troops, and another was killed trying to resist capture. Meanwhile, the Bosnian Serbs, hitherto united in their opposition to the Dayton peace plan and NATO's efforts to enforce it, have sharply divided under pressure from the United States and its allies. Last week about half of the leadership of the Bosnian Serb military threw their support to Bosnian Serb president Biljana Plavsic, the one-time stooge of indicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic. She is now, with the full and forceful backing of NATO, maneuvering to strip Karadzic of his power. Municipal and political leaders, chiefly in the western portion of Bosnian Serb territory, have also begun rallying to Plavsic. Or to put it more accurately, these and many thousands of civilian Bosnian Serbs are now throwing in their lot with NATO and the Dayton peace process. As one Bosnian Serb politician told a reporter last week, "It seems that [President Plavsic] has the support of the world. That's why so many people support her." The recent flexing of NATO muscle—diplomatic, economic, and military—has had the predictable effect of emboldening those in the region who want to join the West and take part in the Dayton process, and isolating those who do not.

It's too early for celebration, but it is worth noting what can be accomplished with just a little bold leadership. A scant three months ago, the NATO mission in Bosnia looked to be in an irrecoverable nose dive. The mighty NATO peacekeeping force was hunkered down in its bunkers, fearful that even the smallest effort to implement the Dayton accord would provoke a deadly assault by Karadzic's thugs. Encouraged by NATO's palpable fear of conflict, Karadzic and his gang not only roamed free but looked to be succeeding in sabotaging U.S. and NATO policy—by violently preventing the return of refugees, undermining international efforts at political and economic reconstruction in Bosnia, and preparing for the next phase of the

war, which would begin the moment NATO troops departed.

In the United States, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, a staunch opponent of the Bosnia mission, was courting congressional favor by promising a prompt withdrawal by the June 1998 "deadline" regardless of the consequences. The Republican-led Congress, guided by the likes of John Kasich, was voting for various resolutions requiring the certain withdrawal of U.S. troops next summer or even earlier. Our NATO allies, following Washington's "lead," were falling over one another in a scramble to prepare for the inevitable retreat. And President Clinton was fiddling while his Bosnia policy burned.

The credit for turning this pending disaster into a possible success goes to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who went toe-to-toe with Cohen in an intra-administration battle and won; to the new presidential envoy, Robert S. Gelbard, a tough career diplomat who devised a strategy aimed at success and then set about knocking heads both in Washington and in the Balkans; to the new NATO commander, Gen. Wesley Clark, who gave approval for NATO troops to take charge in Bosnia; and to British prime minister Tony Blair, who took the biggest risks in approving the recent operations, since it was British troops who did the most dangerous work.

But as Churchill once said, this is not the beginning of the end, it is only the end of the beginning. Even the newly invigorated NATO has achieved no more than 10 percent of what needs to be accomplished to make a lasting Bosnian peace possible. And it is far-fetched to think that the other 90 percent—which includes smashing Karadzic's power once and for all and then creating a sustainable system of inter-ethnic cooperation in Bosnia—can be accomplished before the artificial "deadline" of June 1998. The orchestrated mob violence in Brcko last week showed that NATO's present course is not without risk.

Indeed, the great danger now is that, having stepped forward and asserted a clear determination to make the Dayton peace process work, the United

States and its allies will pull back, return to the bunkers, and hope that this brief burst of energy was enough to avert a total failure. This was NATO's disastrous pattern of behavior in the years before Dayton—a little boldness, a little progress, followed by long periods of hopeful timidity that undid all the gains and seriously eroded NATO's credibility.

What is required in the weeks and months ahead are two things, both of them hard. First, NATO troops need to act even more aggressively to accelerate the present momentum, even though this means a higher risk of casualties. They need to continue trying to snatch war criminals and increase their efforts to make it safe for refugees to return to their homes. Above all, NATO needs to make it clear to those Bosnian Serbs who have recently shifted allegiance that they made the right move and joined the winning team. We need to make it clear, not just to Bosnians but to the world, that it's much safer to be our friend than our enemy. And we need to act to ensure that this is, in fact, true.

Second, within the next few weeks President Clinton should state clearly that he intends to keep U.S. troops in Bosnia after June 1998 if, as seems likely, their continued presence is necessary to a durable peace. While he's at it, the president might want to take a moment from his millennial bridge-building to explain to the American people, in a serious and sustained way, why it's vital that the United States stay the course in Bosnia, even if it means casualties. This is a real test of whether Bill Clinton is willing to take seriously his responsibility to shape American foreign policy. Is it too much to expect of the commander in chief that he rise to this occasion?

Such a presidential statement now, given recent events in Bosnia, would be worth two armored divisions. For many months, the perception in the Balkans that the United States was "short of breath," a perception Cohen encouraged last spring, has been a blessing for Karadzic and a curse for his would-be challengers. Now is the time to reverse the psychology by making it clear that Karadzic and Co. cannot simply wait out the clock.

Would Republicans in Congress have the good strategic sense—and the good political instinct—to back this more aggressive approach? This is a testing time for them, too. The track record of the congressional GOP has not been encouraging. While Madeleine Albright talks these days of the lessons of Munich and the dangers of appeasement, stealing a page from Ronald Reagan and George Bush, many congressional Republicans, stealing a page from the 1970s-'80s Democratic Left, seem to prefer to talk about Vietnam and the danger of "quagmires." Twice in the past two years, Republicans have flirted with the idea of driving themselves off a cliff by voting to cut off funding for our troops deployed abroad. The first time, in 1996, they were saved by Bob Dole and John McCain. This year, before the summer recess, the House approved a binding resolution to require a cut-off of funds for Bosnia after June 1998. The Senate's companion measure, though still fundamentally wrong-headed, at least is non-binding. We trust the GOP leadership will insist that the Senate version prevail in conference this month.

But the GOP Congress could do more than avoid this self-inflicted calamity. Republicans could jettison their newly acquired defeatist, neo-isolationist impulses in foreign policy. They could become once again the party of Ronald Reagan. This is the right thing to do. And it is politically smart. Has no one in the party noticed that the GOP attempt, now almost five years old, to be more cautious, more fretful, more pessimistic about the use of American power abroad than Clinton, has manifestly failed to help Republicans? It's time to change direction sharply, and Bosnia is a good place to start. We'd like to see some gutsy Republican introduce a resolution endorsing an extension of the June 1998 "deadline," even before the president summons the courage to ask for it. And we'd like to see some Republican presidential candidate propose such a measure. It would be politically risky—but risk-taking in the spirit of Reagan is better than timid sniping in the tradition of McGovern. Will anyone step forward to pick up the Reagan mantle? ♦