

# Milosevic's collapse

## Tyrant's fall should not reduce U.S. role

By Seth Cropsey

It is too early to claim victory in Belgrade. However, the question is not whether, but when. There are four important points that should not be lost in the good feeling over positive events in the former Yugoslavia:

■ American arms and policy played a key role in Slobodan Milosevic's downfall. The sanctions that the United States imposed helped isolate Serbia economically. NATO's U.S.-led bombing of Bosnian Serb targets in the late summer of 1995 halted the bloody, Milosevic-orchestrated ethnic cleansing in neighboring Bosnia. The U.S.-led alliance bombing campaign of 1999 pushed Mr. Milosevic's forces out of Kosovo, further diminishing the Serbian ruler's ambition to resuscitate greater Serbia.

It is too early to tell for certain, but the Serbian revolt appears to be almost as spontaneous as the 1989 revolution that drove from power and executed dictator Nicolae and his wife Elena Ceausescu of Romania. Leo Tolstoy would point to both revolutions as proof that great men do not move history as much as the great tides of human aspiration and feeling. Democracy is one of these great tides, and America is surely the single most powerful gravitational center of modern democracy's flow. Our actions were pivotal in the unraveling that is taking place in Belgrade today.

■ The terror and warfare visited by Mr. Milosevic on his neighbors from Slovenia to Croatia to Bosnia to Kosovo did not have to last more than a decade. The United States moved slowly and without resolve throughout the period arriving at action only after events had reached the point where they could barely be controlled. The State Department initially resisted the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, thus legitimizing Mr. Milosevic's claim to retain by force the artificial conglomeration that

Joseph Tito had held together with an iron grip since World War II.

When the United States finally recognized Bosnia, ethnic cleansing was reaching its full cry. This we stood by and watched for years. The military offered the Clinton administration preposterously exaggerated accounts of how many troops it would take to end the brutality in Bosnia, and Mr. Clinton believed them. Days after a small Croatian force drove the Bosnian Serbs out of a disputed region along the Bosnian-Croatian border NATO bombing forced the issue to an agreement.

Similarly with Kosovo. Every



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intelligent observer saw the confrontation in Kosovo coming a year before the Clinton administration which, with no options remaining, decided to use force to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. Had the Clinton administration acted earlier both in public and with the private message that NATO would use force to stop the brutalization of Kosovo, there would have been no need to use force in the end.

■ Mr. Milosevic's departure does not end Serbian nationalism; it does not resolve the tension between ethnic Albanian residents of Kosovo and their Serb neighbors; Montenegrin independence remains an issue. Certainly it should be easier to deal with Mr. Kostunica, whose relative moderation, legal background, and lack of a communist past are cause for modest rejoicing. But the region is still volatile. It still needs the calming presence of the United States and other NATO members to assure a democratic and eventually prosperous future. Before long there will be calls in the United States to use Mr.

Milosevic's departure as justification for pulling out of the Balkans.

These should be resisted. Europe has suffered two major strategic illnesses in the preceding seven centuries. The geographic center of the first is in the north, which has seen great power competition between the English and the French, between the French and the Germans, between the Russians and western Europe, and so on. A century of American policy including two hot wars and one cold one have put this conflict to rest. We have a tremendous investment of blood and money in the future of a Europe unified by democracy and the improvements that are spreading to the east.

The second strategic illness has been ethnic hatred. Its geographic center has been the south where Ottoman, Slavic and native populations touch and spark. The Russians' emotional attachment to their linguistic brethren in Serbia; Turkey's interest in their co-religionists in the Balkans; the Greek, German and French connections to selected Balkan states and population — all these are alive today. The links are not as legally binding as they were when a creaking system of alliances turned an assassination in Sarajevo into the First World War. But they are there.

■ If our policy does not stay the course, we risk not only the stability and peace that is possible in the region with Mr. Milosevic out of the picture. A loss of interest or commitment on our part also risks the renewed involvement of other European powers including Russia.

Unfortunately, the United States currently has neither a clear, articulated strategy for the region nor do we have any apparent long-range goals. Our aim should be democracy, peace and prosperity in the Balkans. We should be prepared to keep a stabilizing force in the Balkans for the indefinite future. The peace of the region and of Europe depends upon it. Mr. Milosevic's departure makes it more possible that these goals can now be achieved. This is the time to renew American interest and commitment. It is not the time to declare victory and go home.

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