

THE US GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND THE WAR IN BOSNIA: AN ANALYSIS OF DECLASSIFIED DOCUMENTS¹

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine US government documents on the war in Bosnia declassified in 2013. The files provide a rich source for research on Bosnia in the early 1990s and how the US perceived and responded to the war. While there are different types of declassified documents, the article will focus on how assessments and predictions on Bosnia measured up to what actually took place.

Keywords: US, Bosnia, Balkans, Yugoslavia, War

Apstrakt: Cilj ovog članka je analizirati deklasifikovane dokumente vlade SAD o ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini. Dokumenti koji su deklasifikovani 2013. godine predstavljaju odličan izvor za istraživanje o tome kako je SAD percipirala rat i potom reagovala u Bosni i Hercegovini. Iako postoje različite vrste deklasifikovanih dokumenata, ovaj rad se fokusira na dokumente koji su imali za cilj ocjenu i predviđanje situacije u Bosni i Hercegovini. U radu se nastoji i ponuditi odgovor u kojoj mjeri su ovi dokumenti adekvatno procijenili razvoj događaja tokom rata.

Ključne riječi: SAD, Bosna, Balkan, Jugoslavija, rat

In 2013, Bill Clinton's Presidential Library and the CIA declassified more than 300 documents on America's response to the 1992–1995 war

¹ This research was supported by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.

in Bosnia.² This public access to a trove of documents on Bosnia less than two decades after the war ended was unprecedented. The available documents provide an insight into how the various parts of the US government perceived the war in Bosnia, what they predicted and what policy options they favoured.

According to the Clinton Library, the documents comprise “summaries of Conclusions from National Security Council meetings where senior officials made decisions on the Bosnian conflict, BTF memoranda pertaining to those meetings, key intelligence assessments, and selected materials from the State Department, the National Security Council, and the Department of Defense”.³ While the earliest document is from 1990, most are related to 1995 when the US-led peace effort was undertaken.

The documents released in 2013 represent a part of such documents produced from 1990 onwards. Many are redacted. It is possible that other documents may be declassified in the years and decades ahead. A number of released documents pertain to the Principals and Deputies Committees’ deliberations on Bosnia. While a rich resource for research, this paper is not focused on these documents. In fact, the Principals and Deputies Committee meetings have been researched by David Scheffer in *The Sit Room: In the Theater of War and Peace* published in 2018.

Other documents are on the negotiations at Dayton in November 1995 as the talks unfolded. However, the Dayton peace talks were described in detail in Derek Chollet’s *The Road to the Dayton Accords: A Study of American Statecraft*. Ivo Daalder’s *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy* provides a well-researched study of the US policy towards Bosnia leading up to and including the Dayton negotiations.

² Valerie Hopkins, “Clinton and CIA Declassify Bosnia War Documents”, *Balkan Insight*, 1 October 2013, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/10/01/clinton-and-cia-declassify-bosnia-war-documents/> (accessed 14 April 2023).

³ Bosnian Declassified Records, Bill Clinton Presidential Library, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/collections/show/37> (accessed 14 April 2023).

Ten years after the documents on Bosnia were declassified and more than three decades since the start of the war, what has not been researched is how the various predictions of US government agencies turned out. In other words, with the benefit of hindsight, what predictions were accurate? And, which predictions did not materialize?

The focus of this article is on US assessments and predictions on the collapse of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia. By analysing publicly accessible declassified documents on Bosnia available through the Clinton Library, this paper will seek to examine how predictions on Bosnia measured up to what actually happened. The emphasis of this paper is on what the US government agencies predictions were at the time and how these predictions can be seen from a historical distance of three decades later.

Predicting Yugoslavia's Collapse

The earliest document released on Yugoslavia was issued in late 1990. The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE)⁴ of October 1990 was prescient about Yugoslavia's future outlook. Titled "Yugoslavia Transformed", the NIE offered a bleak prediction for the federation. It predicted that Yugoslavia's demise was imminent: "Within a year the federal system will no longer exist; within two years Yugoslavia will probably have dissolved as a state". The NIE stated that attempts at economic reforms would fail and that neither the Yugoslav National Army nor the Communist Party would keep the federation intact.

The NIE further stated that "it is likely that Serbian repression in Kosovo will result in an armed uprising by the majority Albanian population, supported by large Albanian minorities in Macedonia and Montenegro". As for the situation in Bosnia, the NIE was remarkably foreseeing: "The

⁴ According to Greg Bruno and Sharon Otterman, a National Intelligence Estimate is defined as "the U.S. intelligence community's most authoritative and coordinated written assessment of a specific national-security issue". For more on this type of document, Greg Bruno and Sharon Otterman, "National Intelligence Estimates", *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 14, 2008, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/background/national-intelligence-estimates> (accessed 14 April 2023).

Serbs, however, will attempt to foment uprisings by Serb minorities elsewhere – particularly in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina – and large-scale ethnic violence is likely”.

As for the Western response, the NIE stated that the US could do little to keep Yugoslavia together. The Europeans would officially support Yugoslavia but would go along with its demise.⁵ As the unfolding situation in Yugoslavia showed, the October 1990 NIE’s predictions came true.

Several months later, in March 1991, an intelligence assessment was titled “Yugoslavia: Military Dynamics of a Potential Civil War”. This document stated that “Yugoslavia’s political fabric is badly frayed and may unravel in 1991”. As a result, its view was that a civil war in Yugoslavia was “a distinct possibility”. The assessment predicted that if such a war would occur, it would “probably be disorganized and protracted, with a stalemate the most likely outcome”. While Yugoslavia’s national forces would have an advantage over republics’ forces – Slovenia’s and Croatia’s – the latter would turn out to be “a credible military force”. The document further predicted that the Yugoslav National Army would fall apart along ethnic lines and would turn into an essentially Serbian military force. Lastly, the document predicted that a war in Yugoslavia would turn into a European problem as it would lead to refugee waves.⁶ As the NIE of 1990, this assessment, too, predicted Yugoslavia’s demise. In fact, this assessment was made three months prior to the outbreak of war in Slovenia. And, its conclusion that republics’ forces would be “credible” also turned out to be the case.

Apart from this document, there was just one more declassified document from 1991. A CIA Directorate of Intelligence memorandum titled “Bosnia-Herzegovina: On the Edge of the Abyss” of 19 December 1991 was

⁵ “1990-10-01, National Intelligence Estimate Report re Yugoslavia Transformed”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12289> (accessed 8 April 2023).

⁶ “1991-03-01, Office of European Analysis Intelligence Assessment re Yugoslavia Military Dynamics of a Potential Civil War”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12290> (accessed 8 April 2023).

particularly pessimistic but prescient on the unfolding situation. It noted that Bosnia was a mini-Yugoslavia with its ethnic make-up. After Bosnian Serb representatives left the parliament in October 1991, the memorandum stated that the government functioned “sporadically”. The memorandum noted that Bosnia’s president Alija Izetbegović was “a moderate Muslim” who “worked to promote a general settlement that would hold Yugoslavia together and keep Bosnia-Hercegovina out of the fighting”. However, it further stated that “Izetbegovic and other moderates now see events slipping out of their control. In addition to the breakdown of the republic’s carefully constructed coalition government, a similar process is underway in what remains of Bosnia-Hercegovina’s Territorial Defense Forces”.⁷ In fact, the memorandum noted that Izetbegović faced the choice of remaining in a rump Yugoslavia or proceeding with Bosnia’s independence which could trigger a war.

The memorandum predicted what would happen if violence erupted: “... the Serbs will have the support of local JNA commanders. We believe that Serb irregular units have received arms and ammunition from the JNA”. Its prognosis of an impending clash between the JNA and republic forces was bleak. Noting that the JNA was the “dominant military force” in Bosnia, the memorandum stated that “the republic government commands few armed men and almost certainly could not conduct a coordinated defense against the federal army”.⁸ While true that the JNA was well-armed and that Bosnia’s republic forces were outgunned, the prediction about Bosnia’s inability to mount a defense would turn out to be inaccurate when the JNA and Bosnian Serb forces attacked Sarajevo on 2 May 1992 and met with a determined resistance. The same applied to many other parts of Bosnia.

As for Serbia’s and Croatia’s territorial ambitions, the memorandum was spot on: “Intelligence and press reports indicate that both Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and Croatian President Franjo Tuđman are eyeing

⁷“1991-12-19, Office of European Analysis Report re Bosnia-Hercegovina On the Edge of the Abyss”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12291>, 2. (accessed 9 April 2023).

⁸Ibid., 3.

annexation of parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina to their respective territories... we believe that Bosnia-Herzegovina continues to figure prominently in the Croatian leadership's thinking. For Milošević it is a question of realizing his plan for a 'greater Serbia' that would bring all Serb-populated areas under Belgrade's roof".⁹

This document predicted that violence and conflict would be the most likely scenario in Bosnia in the coming period. The country would "either fall under the sway of Serbia or Croatia or look beyond the Balkan peninsula to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Libya for economic, political, and perhaps military support".¹⁰ In fact, faced with attacks by the JNA and Bosnian Serb forces, and with an UN-imposed arms embargo curtailing its ability to procure weapons, the Bosnian government did turn for support to both the Western countries but also to beyond the Balkans as predicted in the December 1991 memorandum.

The War Starts

In April 1992, a new National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was issued. Titled "A Broadening Balkan Crisis: Can It Be Managed", the document was prepared as war broke out in Bosnia. This NIE repeated the Intelligence Community's previous views that Belgrade was working to establish a "Greater Serbia". It stated that Milošević "has used Serb leaders in Bosnia to create a 'Greater Serbia', while denying official involvement. This objective enjoys wide support, and even if Milošević were persuaded to abandon it or were removed from power, other Serbians would continue to pursue it". The document noted that "the fighting in Bosnia is likely to intensify" and that the JNA and Serbia and Croat irregulars present in Bosnia made an agreement unlikely.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ "1992-04-01, NIE Report, A Broadening Balkan Crisis Can It Be Managed", *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12293>, 1. (accessed 9 April 2023).

The NIE cautioned about the spill-over effects of the ongoing fighting. It warned that an “uprising by the almost 2 million Albanians of Kosovo is the most serious and likely threat”.¹² The document also stated that a conflict between Macedonians and Albanians was possible if Macedonians ignored Albanian demands.¹³ Both of these predictions failed to materialize at the time but did do with a delayed effect. In fact, the situation in Kosovo worsened in 1998–1999 and in Macedonia in 2001. Another prediction in the NIE which turned out true was that the war in Bosnia would produce massive refugee waves in Western Europe.¹⁴

In its conclusion, the NIE stated that “there is virtually no chance of a negotiated settlement that leads to interethnic peace”. The document also pointed out that a growing Balkans crisis will lead to greater calls on the US to act. And, this would lead to a dilemma: “Greater US engagement increases the risk that US forces could become involved in the fighting. However, failure to act or to achieve a positive outcome would have a negative impact on the US security role in Europe”.¹⁵ Indeed, this dilemma was to shape much of the US policy debate on how to respond to Bosnia. Opponents of intervention, foremost among them Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, made the case against intervention.¹⁶ Advocates of intervention argued that the US had an interest in maintaining its leadership in Europe and beyond.

To respond to the deteriorating situation in Bosnia, an Interagency Balkan Task Force was established in June 1992. A memorandum from 12 June 1992 on the formation of the Task Force stated that “some form of outside military intervention in the region is increasingly likely, and the

¹² Ibid., 2.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ “1992-04-01, NIE Report, A Broadening Balkan Crisis Can It Be Managed”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12293>, 3. (accessed 9 April 2023).

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Michael R. Gordon, “Powell Delivers a Resounding No On Using Limited Force in Bosnia”, *The New York Times*, 28 September 1992.

United States will play a facilitating role, including intelligence support”.¹⁷ In fact, many documents released in 2013 are those produced by the Task Force.

In early August 1992, an intelligence memorandum of the DCI Inter-agency Balkan Task Force dealt with the question of European views on using force in Bosnia. It stated that the West European governments would object to the deployment of troops in Bosnia with a view to resolving the conflict. The UK and France were particularly opposed to a military intervention.¹⁸ Furthermore, London and Paris led the way in opposing Western air strikes in Bosnia. Germany was ambivalent but Turkey advocated such an approach with the backing of the UN.¹⁹

Then, on 19 August 1992, an intelligence memorandum on Bosnia addressed the issue of the humanitarian situation in Bosnia. The memorandum described the destruction in Bosnia and the deteriorating humanitarian situation. The cities and towns in Bosnia were swelled with incoming refugees. It noted that the “pattern of population displacement from the countryside to the cities will probably continue, in particular as long as Bosnian Serbs are able to continue their ‘ethnic cleansing’ campaign”. The memorandum stated that Bosnian Muslims “have been the hardest hit by the violence and social dislocations. Almost two thirds of the Muslim population has been either uprooted or is now living under constant military attack. As a result, cities that were once multicultural are now suddenly ‘homogeneous’”.²⁰ The document’s prediction was that Bosnian cities and the populations in them would “probably fall to near and in some cases below the level of subsistence”. It also predicted that the coming winter

¹⁷ “1992-06-12, Memo to DI Executive Officers re Establishment of Interagency Balkan Task Force”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12294> (accessed 12 April 2023).

¹⁸ “1992-08-10, BTF Memorandum, European Views on the Use of Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12295>, 2. (accessed 9 April 2023).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

in 1992 would be harsh and that this would be difficult for the internally displaced, the refugees and the population under sieges.

The following year, an intelligence memorandum titled “Greater Serbia: A Balkan Troublemaker for the 1990s” was issued on 27 January 1993. The document was based on an interagency analysis and a forecasting model which sought to assess what a “Greater Serbia” would mean. It concluded that Belgrade was determined to establish an ethnically homogenous “Greater Serbia”. The memorandum’s summary stated that “the conciliatory attitude of Milošević and the Bosnian Serbs during recent negotiations in Geneva is, we believe, a tactical manoeuvre to buy time. Belgrade is not likely to stop providing active support for the creation of an ethnically pure greater Serbia by force unless the international community” conducted air strikes on Bosnian Serb military targets or armed Bosnia and Croatia.²¹ The memorandum also predicted that a “Greater Serbia” would be “a disruptive force in Europe” and would inflame conflicts with neighbours and undertake “ethnic cleansing of Kosovo”.²² In fact, the latter is precisely what Belgrade undertook in 1998–1999. The document concluded by stating that “Serbian expansionist and ethnic policies are likely to remain unchanged” even if Milošević were no longer in power.²³ Indeed, the memorandum’s last paragraph is titled “Milošević is Only Part of the Problem”.²⁴

Two months later, in March 1993, several important documents on Bosnia were issued on the same day. On 23 March 1993, the Interagency Balkan Task Force issued a memorandum titled “Serb War Aims”. It began by stating that “The central Serb goals in Bosnia have been and remain the destruction of Bosnia as a viable independent state and the incorpora-

²¹ “1993-01-27A, Office of European Analysis Report re Greater Serbia A Balkan Troublemaker for the 1990s”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12301>, 1. (accessed 10 April 2023).

²² *Ibid.*, 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

tion of Serb-claimed regions into a greater Serbia”.²⁵ The document further stated that Serb forces were trying to overrun the Bosnian Muslim enclaves in eastern Bosnia and to, thereby, have control over the Drina River. Apart from this objective, the memorandum also noted that eliminating Muslim enclaves would cut off any communication between Bosnian Muslims and Muslims in the Sandžak region of Serbia.²⁶ The document’s assessment was that the Serb forces “believe it is critical to destroy Sarajevo as a symbol of a multi-ethnic state”.²⁷

On that same day, a memorandum on the “Likely Consequences of Warnings of Air Strikes against Bosnian Serbs and Serbia” was issued. It stated that threats to use force were not going to produce any effect. Rather, “to be effective, strikes would have to be directed against both the Bosnian Serbs and Serbia proper, and would widen the war”. Furthermore, it stated that “Western airstrikes against targets in Bosnia and Serbia probably would make both Belgrade and the Bosnian Serbs even more defiant and resistant to making any political concessions to the West”.²⁸

Another memorandum issued on the same day was on “Likely Consequences of Partially Lifting the Arms Embargo in Conjunction with Air Strikes”. Its key finding was that “Delivering light weapons to the Bosnian Muslims and launching multinational airstrikes against Serb positions would not have any lasting effect on the Bosnian Government’s military situation, but would probably lead to the breakdown of the Vance-Owen talks and the shutdown of UN humanitarian relief missions”.²⁹ The Bosnian

²⁵ “1993-03-23B, BTF Memorandum re Serb War Aims”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12318>, 1. (accessed 10 April 2023).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸ “1993-03-23D, BTF Memorandum re Likely Consequences of Warnings of Air Strikes”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12320> (accessed 12 April 2023).

²⁹ “1993-03-23E, BTF Memorandum re Likely Consequences of Partially Lifting the Arms Embargo in Conjunction with Air Strikes”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12321> (accessed 12 April 2023).

government had been calling for a lifting of the embargo and for air strikes. In fact, the use of airpower turned out to be highly effective when the US-led air strikes were conducted in August and September 1995.

While the previous document dealt with the likely consequences of a partial lifting of the embargo, another memorandum also issued on 23 March 1993 addressed the potential impact of fully lifting the arms embargo on Bosnia. Its key finding was that “Lifting the arms embargo completely would increase the Bosnian Government forces’ fighting capabilities in some areas and deflect Islamic criticism that the UN embargo is unfair, but would not enable the Bosnians to regain lost territories without long-term foreign assistance. They would likely encourage Muslim hardliners to back away from the Vance-Owen talks”. It also predicted that Croatia would take a cut of the arms flowing to Bosnia and Serbia would step up its support for Bosnian Serb forces. Furthermore, Russia would oppose a lifting of the embargo.³⁰

1993: Bleak Prospects

A number of declassified documents from May 1993 onwards held a bleak prospect for Bosnia’s survival. This was a difficult year for Bosnia as the Sarajevo government fought on two fronts. In May 1993, a new National Intelligence Estimate on Bosnia was issued. This was the second NIE since April 1992. It stated that the Vance-Owen peace plan held “little prospect of stabilizing the region, even if international pressure brings about Bosnian Serb agreement to the Plan”. Even if the Bosnian Serbs accepted this plan, the NIE stated that the Intelligence Community viewed Bosnia’s dissolution as “likely in any case”.³¹ The document further added that even if Bosnian Serbs accepted the plan, “the goal of preserving Bosnia

³⁰ “1993-03-23F, BTF Memorandum re Likely Consequences of Fully Lifting the Arms Embargo on Bosnia”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12322> (accessed 12 April 2023).

³¹ “1993-05-01, NIE Report re Prospects for Bosnia”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12327>, 1. (accessed 9 April 2023).

as a single, decentralized state runs counter to the long-term Serb objective of absorbing large parts of Bosnia”³²

As for the reactions to the Vance-Owen plan, the NIE predicted that Bosnian Serbs would seek to capture more territory. Bosnian Croats would continue their control of western Herzegovina and “Zagreb increasingly views Bosnia-Herzegovina as unviable and would be happy to absorb parts of it should it fall apart”. The document predicted that Bosnian Muslims would “resist moves by Serbia and Croatia to absorb the remaining parts of a fragmented Bosnia”.³³ This assessment was true in 1993 and remained so for the rest of the war.

The NIE’s prediction about Bosnia reflected the difficult situation that Sarajevo faced in 1993. In fact, the NIE predicted three scenarios: UN safe-havens for Muslims that could lead to a rump Muslim-dominated state; Muslim territories affiliated with Croatia; or de facto UN protected areas.³⁴ In fact, the idea of closer alignment of Bosnian Muslims and Croatia can be seen materializing in the Washington Agreement of 1994 but also in the Dayton agreement which provided for special parallel relations with Zagreb. In other words, preserving a multiethnic Bosnia was seen as an unlikely scenario back in 1993.

The dire situation in Bosnia in 1993 continued when the Bosnian Serbs’ forces exerted pressure on Sarajevo in summer 1993. Amid calls for US-led air strikes on Bosnian Serbs’ military targets, a memorandum in early August 1993 on the potential US unilateral air strikes in Bosnia warned of its consequences. It concluded that “any unilateral US action without further consultation with NATO and with the UN would have very negative short-term, and long-term consequences for our traditional and developing alliances”³⁵

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

³⁵ “1993-08-05, NIC Memorandum re Likely Allied Reactions to Unilateral U.S. Actions in Bosnia”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12333>, 2. (accessed 12 April 2023).

The bleak outlook for Bosnia's survival continued as seen in an intelligence assessment from October 1993. It stated that its NIE on Bosnia and its assessment that the country could not be kept together were still valid. The document predicted that "a Bosnian confederation will not survive any agreement reached in Geneva. Serbia and Croatia will begin to absorb their client ministates, leaving a Muslim rump either dependent on Western support or, in the unlikely event Bosnian-Croatian talks succeed, associated with Zagreb". In fact, it predicted that "Within two years, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats will probably secede the Bosnian union".³⁶

Reflecting the bleak outlook at the time, amid the Bosnian government fighting on two fronts, the document stated that "With a multiethnic state including all of Bosnia no longer possible, President Izetbegovic and his colleagues are intent on maximizing the territorial boundaries of a Muslim entity to improve its dim chances of survival. Izetbegović is deeply disappointed in the international community's readiness to accept a 'Serb victory', and will continue to press for more concessions".³⁷

As for Europe's response to the situation in Bosnia, the assessment was direct: "Europeans are concerned that a Muslim minstate will be a bridgehead in Europe for radical Islamic movements, but they prefer this risk to a Serb-Croat partition that would cause more Bosnian Muslims to migrate to Western Europe".³⁸

The documents from 1993 reflect the difficult situation that the Bosnian government faced at the time. And, in fact, all the international peace proposals until then had essentially envisioned a de facto partition of the country. Assessments of its survival as a unified state were dim as reflected in the declassified documents.

³⁶ "1993-10-01, NIC Report re Prospects for Bosnia", *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12335> (accessed 11 April 2023).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

Embargo: To Lift or Not to Lift?

From 1992 onwards, the Bosnian government worked to marshal international support for a lifting of the arms embargo. Imposed by the UN Security Council in 1991, the embargo in effect curtailed Bosnia's ability to defend itself. Its lifting became a key foreign policy objective of Sarajevo. Bosnian government officials had made the case to both the George H. W. Bush and the Bill Clinton Administrations. Top officials reached out to US senators and congressmen to seek their support. In fact, from summer 1992, a number of US legislators had been calling for an end to the embargo.

Since the embargo was imposed by the UN Security Council, its official lifting could be undertaken by the same route. However, the UK and France opposed such a step. This meant that a multilateral lifting was impossible. For this reason, congressional Bosnia hawks pushed for a US unilateral lifting of the embargo. To this end, they introduced legislation and resolutions seeking its end. Led by Senators Bob Dole and Joseph Lieberman, and Representative Frank McCloskey, these pro-Bosnian legislators continued pressing the Clinton Administration on Bosnia.

In late January 1994, Bob Dole's amendment on Bosnia was adopted by the Senate. The amendment stated that Serbia was directly involved in the war in Bosnia and had been supporting irregular forces in the country. Furthermore, the amendment stated that Bosnia had been unable to defend itself due to the international arms embargo. It expressed the 'sense of the Senate' that the US embargo on Bosnia should be lifted and stipulated that the president should not only terminate the embargo upon receipt of such a request from the Bosnian Government but that he should also provide military assistance to Bosnia if requested. The amendment, which was a major victory for Dole's leadership on Bosnia, was adopted in the Senate by a vote of 87–9.³⁹

³⁹ S.AMDT.1281 Amends S. 1281 – Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1994 and 1995, January 27, 1994, 103rd Congress, 1st Session.

Then, in April 1994, Dole introduced a bill to lift the arms embargo. With 33 co-sponsors, the bill reflected Dole's January amendment by stipulating once again that the president should terminate the embargo after receiving a request from Bosnia for assistance.⁴⁰

It is against this backdrop of congressional attempts to lift the embargo that the 1994 documents on Bosnia can be analysed.

In May 1994, a memorandum addressed the potential consequences of the UN Security Council lifting the embargo on Bosnia. The memorandum started by stating that "The main impact of the embargo on supplying arms to governments of the former Yugoslavia has been to limit the Bosnian Government's military capabilities. It has had little impact on Croatia, and virtually no effect on Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs".⁴¹ It found that "Lifting the arms embargo against the Bosnian Government would intensify the fighting and would not lead to early termination of the conflict. Instead, the apparent international tilt toward the Bosnian Government would embolden it to fight on, leading to a more violent Bosnian Serb reaction".⁴² The document predicted that the Bosnian government could not roll back Serb territorial gains. It also predicted that Belgrade would increase its support for Bosnian Serbs. Another prediction was that the UN troops in Bosnia would become targeted by Bosnian Serb forces.

This memorandum also stated that a de facto lifting of the embargo – its non-enforcement – would have the same effect as a formal lifting by the UN Security Council. In fact, in April 1994, National Security Advisor Tony Lake spoke to President Clinton aboard Air Force One about the arms embargo as he returned from Richard Nixon's funeral. Clinton approved that there would be no instructions given to US Ambassador in

⁴⁰ S.2042 – A bill to remove the United States arms embargo of the Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, April 21, 1994, 103rd Congress, 2nd Session.

⁴¹ "1994-05-13, NIC Memorandum re Lifting the Arms Embargo Impact on the War in Bosnia", *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12354>, 2. (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 6.

Croatia Peter Galbraith about arms flows to Bosnia.⁴³ When US ambassador in Croatia Peter Galbraith asked for instructions on the US position on the arms embargo, Lake's reply was "You are uninstructed".⁴⁴ This was essentially the embargo's non-enforcement and it meant that the US did not prevent arms flowing to the Bosnian government.

The May 1994 memorandum noted that such non-enforcement would "strain US relations with Russia and the NATO Allies, principally Britain and France" and would undermine other UN arms embargoes.⁴⁵ Indeed, a similar argument was made by Senator Claiborne Pell and Representative Lee Hamilton in *The New York Times* in early May 1994.⁴⁶

However, the memorandum stated that on the positive side, non-enforcement of the embargo would "boost US and Western credibility with members of the Organization of Islamic Countries, particularly Turkey" and "force Bosnian Serbs, and to some extent Belgrade, to pay a higher military price to continue the war in Bosnia".⁴⁷

Senator Dole had continued pushing for embargo-lifting. He introduced an amendment in early August 1994 that provided for an end to the US arms embargo on Bosnia by 15 November of that year. With 11 co-sponsors, the amendment passed the Senate by 58–42 and had bipartisan support.⁴⁸ Three months after the May memorandum, another assessment on the arms embargo was prepared.

In August 1994, a Special Estimate of the National Intelligence Council on the Bosnian arms embargo stated that "unilateral US decision to suspend compliance with the embargo and arm Bosnian Government forces would

⁴³ David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals*, New York: Scriber, 2001, 333–334.

⁴⁴ George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019, 306.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁶ Claiborne Pell and Lee H. Hamilton, "Don't Arm Bosnia", *The New York Times*, 5 May 1994.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁸ S.Amdt.2479 to H.R.4650; 103rd Congress (1993–1994).

intensify the fighting in Bosnia. It would not make a substantial difference on the battlefield unless heavy weapons, extensive training, and logistic support were included. Outside ground and air force intervention would be needed to defend vulnerable Bosnian positions until government forces were prepared to conduct effective multiunit offensive operations. The Bosnian Government's war aims would escalate, leading it to defer diplomatic solutions to the conflict".⁴⁹

The document predicted that the Bosnian Serb forces would then attack the Bosnian government forces. These attacks would also be carried out against UNPROFOR personnel. And, Belgrade would no longer carry out the supposed blockade of Bosnian Serb forces. The document found that Croatia was key in any decision not to enforce the embargo. Zagreb would take a cut of the arms flowing to Sarajevo and would be uneasy about empowering Muslims.⁵⁰ This document concluded by stating that "A unilateral US move without prior agreements, especially with Britain and France, on the future of UNPROFOR forces could damage allied confidence in Washington's leadership of the NATO alliance". While the Special Estimate mostly was about the perceived negative consequences of US unilaterally ending arms embargo enforcement, it concluded by stating "On the plus side, US unilateral moves will be welcomed in the Muslim world, especially by Turkey".⁵¹

Then, in November 1994, another Special Estimate on the implications of a multilateral arms embargo lifting was circulated. It stated that a "multilateral lifting of the arms embargo would lead both sides to escalate the fighting". Noting that the intelligence community had different views on whether the UN Security Council would vote to lift the embargo on Bosnia, the document predicted that Sarajevo would seek to achieve control over

⁴⁹ "1994-04, NIE Report re Ending U.S. Compliance with the Bosnian Arms Embargo Military and Political Implications", *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12340> (accessed 11 April 2023).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

more territory beyond the Contact Group plan. It also noted that “Bosnia Serb intentions – consolidation of Serb-held territory and confederation with Serbia – remain unchanged”. It also predicted that Bosnian Serb forces would try to take over the enclaves in eastern Bosnia.⁵²

A few days later, a memorandum on Bihać was issued. In mid-November 1994, the situation in the northwestern Bosnian enclave of Bihać was particularly difficult. Its fall seemed imminent. A memorandum issued on 15 November stated that the worst case scenario is Bosnian Serb forces and Krajina Serbs attacking Bihać and “threatening the survival of the Bosnian Government’s Fifth Corps”. Bihać’s fall was deemed as a threat to Croatia’s chances of retaking Krajina. Such a scenario was deemed to have the potential to restart the war in Croatia.⁵³

In fact, the situation in Bihać was so dire that National Security Advisor Tony Lake wrote to President Bill Clinton on 27 November 1994 that “the city has effectively fallen”.⁵⁴ Lake wrote that “Bihać’s fall has exposed the inherent contradictions in trying to use NATO air power coercively against the Bosnian Serbs when our Allies have troops on the ground attempting to maintain impartiality in performing a humanitarian mission”. Because of the British and French opposition to Western air strikes in Bosnia, Lake stated that “the ‘stick’ of military pressure seems no longer viable”.⁵⁵ In other words, maintaining the transatlantic alliance took priority over the situation in Bosnia.

In addition to the arms embargo and the crisis in Bihać, a third document on Bosnia was produced that month. On 22 November 1994, an intelligence

⁵² “1994-11-01, NIC Report re A Multilateral Lifting of the Arms Embargo on Bosnia Political and Military Implications”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12371> (accessed 11 April 2023).

⁵³ “1994-11-15, BTF Memorandum re Bihac Implications of the Worst Case Scenario”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12375>, 1. (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁵⁴ “1994-11-27B, Anthony Lake to President Clinton re Bosnia Policy after the Fall of Bihac”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12382> (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

memorandum dealt with the state of the Muslim-Croat Federation. It stated that a cease-fire between Bosnia's Muslims and Croats was the Federation's most important success. The memorandum explained why each actor still supported the Federation. "All sources consistently indicate that the Bosnian Muslims view the federation as a means to prosecute the war against the Serbs more effectively", stated the memorandum. It added that "Bosnian Muslims signed onto the Washington Agreements because they saw the federation as a means to avoid the partition that was inherent in the earlier Vance-Owen plan".⁵⁶ The document also assessed that Bosnian Muslims wanted to retain their predominance in the state institutions. As for Bosnian Croats, "they signed the Washington agreements to end their losses in the war with the Muslims and under strong pressure from Croatian President Tuđman".⁵⁷ Tuđman's cooperation on the Federation was motivated by his quest for Western support in an effort to retake control over the Krajina. Furthermore, his cooperation "has given him a cut of the weapons flowing across his territory to the Bosnian Government, helped him expand Croatia's economic ties with Western Europe, and has given him political and economic entree to the Islamic supporters of the Bosnian Muslims".⁵⁸ The memorandum concluded that the real functioning of the Federation was in doubt but that it would probably last until the war ended.

At the end of 1994, a Special Estimate circulated in December 1994 dealt with the issue of potential UNPROFOR withdrawal from Bosnia and its implications. The document pointed out that "withdrawal is a virtual certainty if the arms embargo on the Bosnian Government is lifted". The document also concluded that "if the arms embargo is lifted, most European countries and Russia will not only withdraw their forces but will also press for terminating the UN effort". Furthermore, it was estimated that the

⁵⁶ "1994-11-22, BTF Memorandum re Muslim-Croat Federation More than a Cease-Fire", *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12379>, 2. (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

European governments “fear that their withdrawal would prompt attempts to establish a predominantly Islamic peacekeeping force in Bosnia”.⁵⁹

Ending the War

Most of the documents declassified in 2013 were from 1995. This was the year of the Clinton Administration’s most concerted effort for peace in Bosnia. A number of documents are from the Principals and Deputies Committees on Bosnia.

The bulk of the declassified information on 1995 is generally well-known and has been researched over the past years. As for assessments and predictions, it is worth referring to several here.

On 23 February 1995, the Interagency Balkan Task Force issued its view of the next three months for Bosnia. As for Sarajevo, the document stated that “Bosnian leaders firmly believe that they can regain territory from the Bosnian Serbs and preserve the concept of a unified Bosnia within its internationally recognized boundaries only by military pressure. They are increasingly confident of their own military capabilities and see the tide swinging in their favor as they look out several years”.⁶⁰ Bosnian Croats “are largely satisfied with the territory they now control and take their guidance from Zagreb, not Sarajevo. The Herzegovinian hardliners leading the Bosnian Croats ultimately hope to be integrated into a Greater Croatia, a vision that Tuđman does not discourage”.⁶¹ Meanwhile, “Bosnian Serb leaders will accept nothing less than an independent state as an interim measure toward the creation of an ill-defined ‘Greater Serbia’”.⁶² The document predicted that “fighting will probably

⁵⁹ “1994-12-01B, NIC Report re Prospects for UNPROFOR Withdrawal from Bosnia”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12385> (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁶⁰ “1995-02-23, BTF Report re The Balkans the Next Three Months”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12411>, 1. (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

increase in the rest of Bosnia by late March or early April as the weather improves”.⁶³

An intelligence report dated 1 June 1995 addressed the situation in the eastern Bosnian enclaves. It stated that “the Bosnian Serbs have long sought the elimination of the three Muslim enclaves in eastern Bosnia – Žepa, Srebrenica, and Goražde, with a total population of some 120,000 – because they represent a threat to ultimate Serb control in the area, are viewed as bases for Muslim guerrilla operations, and are perceived as a potential threat to foster unrest in Muslim-populated areas in Serbia”. The report predicted that “Over time-probably within six months to a year after a UN pullout, the Bosnian Serbs almost certainly would move to take the enclaves”.⁶⁴ In fact, Bosnian Serb forces attacked Srebrenica slightly over a month after this document was issued. And, the attack did not follow a UN withdrawal. The notion that Bosnian Muslim enclaves would provide a link to Sandžak was unsubstantiated as the enclaves were struggling for survival since 1992.

In the run-up to the Dayton peace talks, there was an interesting report on the rivalries among the top Bosnian officials. An intelligence report of 27 September 1995 dealt with the issues of divisions among the Bosnian government leadership. It reported of the rivalry between Prime Minister Haris Silajdžić and Foreign Minister Muhamed Šaćirbey with Alija Izetbegović backing Šaćirbey. It also reported that Šaćirbey had isolated Silajdžić from negotiations. Furthermore, there was the rivalry between Silajdžić and Ejup Ganić.⁶⁵ In addition to personal rivalry, the report also pointed out the differences over the future vision for Bosnia. The document also noted that Silajdžić “objected to calling the Bosnian Serb entity the Serb

⁶³ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴ “1995-06-01B, BTF Report re Prospects for the Eastern Enclaves Following a UN Retrenchment”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12473>, 1. (accessed 12 April 2023).

⁶⁵ “1995-09-27B, BTF Report re The Bosnian Government Divisions Show Confusion in Peace Negotiations”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12544>, 1-2. (accessed 13 April 2023).

Republic”.⁶⁶ A memorandum of 28 September 1995 by Jim Pardew, too, pointed out the frictions at the top level of the Bosnian government.⁶⁷

These rivalries were known but it is still important to see how they were perceived at that time. Other accounts of the same period, including by David Halberstam, have similarly pointed out to such rivalries.

The following month, there was a report which confirmed what many had predicted a long time. An intelligence report of 14 November 1995 was titled “Belgrade’s Support for the Bosnian Serb Army: Apparently Ongoing”. It found that “Serbian President Milošević and Yugoslav Army (VJ) leaders, are involved in supplying the Bosnian Serb Army (BSA) with missile components, fuel, and technical support”.⁶⁸

Among the last documents from late 1995 is an intelligence report of 19 December which stated that “transferring the Serb-controlled suburbs of Sarajevo to Federation control will present IFOR with its first major test”. It predicted that “most Sarajevo Serbs probably would leave rather than submit to control by Muslim authorities, but it is not clear yet whether they would adopt a ‘scorched’ earth retreat”.⁶⁹ In fact, this is what happened when Bosnian Serb leaders instigated the Serb population to leave Sarajevo.

What Did the Assessments Get Right?

The assessments and reports on Yugoslavia and Bosnia predicted the unfolding situation correctly in a number of cases.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁷ “1995-09-28B, BTF Memorandum re Next Steps”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12546> (accessed 13 April 2023).

⁶⁸ “1995-11-14C, BTF Report re Belgrade’s Support for the Bosnian Serb Army Apparently Ongoing”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12590> (accessed 14 April 2023).

⁶⁹ “1995-12-19A, BTF Report re Sarajevo Serbs More Likely to Flee Than Fight”, *Clinton Digital Library*, available at: <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/12610> (accessed 14 April 2023).

The October 1990 NIE prediction that Yugoslavia would dissolve within two years was accurate. Its prediction that a Bosnian Serb uprising in Bosnia would lead to violence was spot on.

A memorandum from December 1991 also predicted that Bosnian Serbs would have the support of the JNA. Furthermore, the documents found that Milošević and Tuđman had ambitions to annex parts of Bosnia. It noted that Milošević was pursuing his goal of a “Greater Serbia”. The memorandum also correctly predicted that Bosnia would seek support from Muslim-majority countries.

In August 1992, a memorandum of the European views on using force in Bosnia correctly stated that the British and the French were opposed to intervention in Bosnia. In fact, this continued until late summer 1995.

In early January 1993, a memorandum on the “Greater Serbia” found that Belgrade was determined to pursue this objective. It also predicted that Serbian expansionism would continue and that Belgrade would conduct “ethnic cleansing” in Kosovo.

A document from November 1994 predicted that Bosnian Serb forces would try to overrun the eastern enclaves. In fact, this prediction – unfortunately – turned out to be true as Srebrenica was captured on 11 July 1995. Similarly, an assessment from June 1995 addressed the situation in the enclaves. However, the documents did not predict that Srebrenica and Žepa would fall in a month.

What Assessments Did Not Materialize?

Apart from the above assessments which turned out to be accurate, the US agencies’ assessments on Bosnia also got a number of scenarios inaccurate.

A December 1991 memorandum predicted that the JNA would support Bosnian Serbs. However, it predicted that Bosnia’s republic forces would not be able to mount a defense to the JNA and Bosnian Serb forces. In fact,

Bosnia's resistance forces pushed back on 2 May 1992 and in a number of other cases.

Perhaps most interestingly, a NIE from April 1992 predicted violence in Bosnia but not its large scale. This was at the outset of the war in Bosnia. It had two predictions that did not materialize in 1992 but did so several years later: an uprising by Kosovar Albanians and a conflict between Macedonians and Albanians.

An interesting finding from March 1993 played up the potential link between the eastern Bosnian enclaves and Sandžak. In fact, the enclaves were trying to survive on their own and did not pose a security threat to Serbia's territorial integrity. It is also interesting that the intelligence reports were skeptical as to the effectiveness of air strikes on Bosnian Serb military targets. The documents, including those from March 1993, played down the impact of lifting the arms embargo. For instance, lifting the embargo was not seen as having an impact of Bosnian government forces' ability to retake captured territories. This view was repeated in a May 1994 memorandum. An August 1994 memorandum, too, predicted the same along with more intense fighting. As the Bosnian government offensives – along with Croatia's – showed in the summer of 1995, rolling back Serb territorial gains proved possible.

Several documents from 1993 were particularly gloomy about Bosnia's survival. In a difficult year for Bosnia, the documents concluded that the country's dissolution was likely. Keeping a multiethnic Bosnia intact seemed an unlikely scenario in 1993.

Among the predictions that did not materialize was that Bihać would fall. The situation in Bihać in late 1994 was exceptionally difficult and it is no wonder that the intelligence assessments predicted its capture.

Conclusion

Documents on Bosnia declassified a decade ago provide a rich resource for historians and political scientists. For students of US foreign policy,

these documents provide an insight into how America responded to a war in Europe at the close of the 20th century. For students of Bosnia's recent history, the documents provide a glimpse into how US agencies viewed the war and its unfolding at the time.

The declassified documents from 2013 are likely only a part of similar documents on Bosnia produced in the 1990s. Many are redacted but it is possible to get a sense of how the war was perceived.

The main contours of America's policy towards Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 are well-known. These have been researched by a number of scholars in the US, Bosnia and beyond. What the declassified documents shed light on are the nuances of this policy.

An understudied aspect of this period was the various US agencies' assessments on Bosnia. By analyzing declassified documents, this article attempted to explore how various assessments measured up to what actually happened. In other words, it is an assessment of what the 1990s assessments got right and what they missed.

In fact, writing Bosnia's recent history without a reference to US and other declassified documents would be incomplete.

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AMERIČKE VLADINE AGENCIJE I RAT U BOSNI: ANALIZA DEKLASIFICIRANIH DOKUMENATA

Sažetak

Dokumenti deklasifikovani 2013. godine predstavljaju vrlo značajan, ali nedovoljno istražen izvor za razumijevanje američke politike prema Bosni i Hercegovini. Ovi dokumenti, nastali uglavnom u američkoj obavještajnoj zajednici, predstavljaju uvid u američko viđenje rata. Fokus ovog rada je na dokumentima od 1990. do 1995. godine koji su direktno vezani za Bosnu i Hercegovinu. Dijelovi dokumenata su zatamnjeni, a mnogi će dokumenti eventualno ugledati svjetlo dana u godinama i decenijama koje tek slijede.

Ipak, iz trenutno dostupnih dokumenata može se steći bolja slika o tome kako je američka obavještajna zajednica percipirala razvoj situacije u Bosni i Hercegovini i kakve je procjene dostavljala ključnim donosiocima odluka u Vašingtonu. Iako je opšta slika o američkoj vanjskoj politici prema Bosni i Hercegovini od 1992. do 1995. godine u najvećoj mjeri istražena, objavljivanje deklasifikovanih dokumenata pruža uvid u mnoge detalje, ali i viđenja razvoja situacije u Bosni i Hercegovini u tom periodu. Kao takvi, ovi dokumenti predstavljaju primarni izvor za naučna istraživanja.

