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**AMERICAN REALISTS AND THE
WAR IN BOSNIA 1992-1995.**

Abstract: *While there is a significant body of literature on U.S. policy towards Bosnia in the early 1990s, the role and policy recommendations of American realists have been largely overlooked. Realism is a school of thought in international relations which holds that states are the key actors motivated by interests which seek to maximize their power and security in an anarchic world. Adherents of this worldview emphasize the pursuit of national interests and the importance of power and force in achieving it. Realists are generally opposed to military interventions where a vital national interest is not at stake.*

The purpose of this article is to fill this gap by analysing both realist policymakers and academics and how they responded to the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995. Several top officials of the George H. W. Bush Administration including the President, Secretary of State James Baker and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft were realists and this worldview shaped the US response to the outbreak of the war in Bosnia. Focused on a host of other foreign policy issues at the time, the Bush Administration was adamant not to get involved militarily in Bosnia. James Baker's statement „We don't have a dog in that fight“ came to define the Bush Administration's Bosnia policy. Its realist outlook combined with the presidential campaign priorities in 1992 to ensure that the Western response to the war in Bosnia was handed over to the Europeans. With realist policymakers in power from the outbreak of the war in spring 1992 through early 1993, many Bosnians hoping for a Western military intervention at the time would later come to realise how far-fetched those hopes were.

In addition to realist policymakers, several prominent realists in the American academia also weighed in on how the US should respond to the war in this part of Southeast Europe in the early 1990s. Academic realists published their opinions and recommended policy options in leading media outlets throughout the three-and-a-half year war. Though their worldview was not shared by the first Bill Clinton Administration, academic realists continued offering policy recommendations on Bosnia.

Academic realists like Robert Pape and Michael Desch opposed the use of air power in Bosnia arguing that it would be ineffective. John Mearsheimer together with Pape called for partition of Bosnia and establishment of homogeneous states in the Balkans and arming of Bosnian Muslims. Kissinger was opposed to a military commitment to Bosnia but did not lay out specific policy recommendations. In sum, both policymakers and academics argued that there was no vital US national interest at stake in Bosnia warranting deployment of ground troops. Even after the Dayton peace talks concluded in late 1995, American realists continued weighing in on Bosnia and offering generally bleak assessments.

While the majority of those recommended policy options were not implemented, realists' views on Bosnia in the 1990s still deserve scholarly attention. Studying American realists provides an overview of how both practitioners and intellectual adherents of a key theory in international relations perceived the war and its outcome. This analysis will also provide a more nuanced understanding of the variety of American responses to the war in Bosnia.

Key words: *Realists, U.S, Bosnia, former Yugoslavia, Balkans.*

AMERIČKI REALISTI I RAT U BOSNI 1992-1995.

Apstrakt: *Iako postoji obimna i značajna literatura o vanjskoj politici SAD prema Bosni i Hercegovini ranih 1990-tih, uloga i političke preporuke američkih realista nisu do sada bili predmet naučnog istraživanja. Realizam je ključna teorije u međunarodnim odnosima koja tvrdi da su države ključni akteri koji su motivisani interesom i nastoje da povećaju svoju moć i sigurnost u vrlo nesigurnom svijetu. Pristalice ove teorije naglašavaju značaj nacionalnih interesa i sile i moći kako si se država očuvala. Realisti se generalno protive vojnim intervencijama gdje nacionalni interes nije direktno ugrožen.*

Cilj ovog rada je popuniti tu prazninu analizom realista zvaničnika i intelektualaca i kako su oni odgovorili na rat u Bosni i Hercegovini od 1992. do 1995. Nekoliko ključnih zvaničnika administracije predsjednika George H. W. Busha bili su realisti uključujući i samog predsjednika, državnog sekretara James Bakera i Savjetnika za nacionalnu sigurnost Brent Scowcrofta i njihov svjetonazor je oblikovao odgovor SAD na početak rata u Bosni i Hercegovini. Administracija je bila fokusirana na niz vanjskopolitičkih pitanja u to vrijeme i bila je odlučna da vojno ne interveniše u Bosni i Hercegovini. Izjava James Bakera kako „nemamo psa u toj borbi“ najbolje ilustruje politiku Busheve administracije prema Bosni i Hercegovini. Realistički svjetonazor zajedno sa prioritetima izborne godine te 1992. je značio da je odgovor Zapada na rat u Bosni i Hercegovini bio prepušten Evropi. Sa realistima na vlasti od početka rata u proljeće 1992. do početka 1993. u SAD, mnogi građani Bosne i Hercegovine

će kasnije saznati da su njihova očekivanja i nadanja zapadnoj vojnoj intervenciji bila nerealna.

Pored visokih zvaničnika koji su donosili odluke, nekoliko realista intelektualaca je također učestvovalo u javnom prostoru SAD predlažući korake koje treba poduzeti kao odgovor na rat u ovom dijelu Jugoistočne Evrope ranih 1990tih. Iako prva administracije Billa Clintona nije imala njihov svjetonazor, realisti intelektualci su nastavili predlagati rješenja za Bosnu i Hercegovinu.

Realisti intelektualci poput Roberta Papea i Michaela Descha bili su protiv upotrebe zračnih napada u Bosni i Hercegovini tvrdeći da bi takvi udari bili neefikasni. John Mearsheimer je zajedno sa Papeom pozvao na podjelu Bosne i Hercegovine i uspostavu homogenih država na Balkanu te na naoružavanje bosanskih muslimana. Kissinger je bio protiv vojne uloge u Bosni i Hercegovini ali nije ponudio detaljne preporuke. U suštini, i realisti zvaničnici i intelektualci su smatrali da rat u Bosni i Hercegovini ne ugrožava vitalne američke nacionalne interese te da ne zahtjeva slanje kopnenih snaga. Američki realisti su nastavili nuditi mišljenja i prijedloge uz vrlo pesimistične prognoze i nakon završetka mirovnih pregovora u Daytonu.

Iako se većina njihovih preporuka nije pretočila u političke odluke, mišljenja i stavovi realista o Bosni i Hercegovini 1990-tih i dalje zaslužuju naučnu pažnju. Izučavanjem američkih realista stiže se bolji pregled kako su praktičari i intelektualni zagovornici ove ključne teorije međunarodnih odnosa percipirali rat i njegov ishod. Ova analiza će ponuditi i jasniju sliku raznolikosti u američkim odgovorima na rat u Bosni i Hercegovini.

Ključne riječi: *Realisti, SAD, Bosna i Hercegovina, bivša Jugoslavija, Balkan.*

When the war in Bosnia broke out in spring 1992, the George H. W. Bush Administration was in its fourth year in office and was seeking re-election. A year after the liberation of Kuwait, the Administration was basking in its glory and hoping for a second term in the White House. The war in this corner of Europe placed the Bush Administration in a precarious position. Not wanting to intervene in a war during the election campaign, the Administration resorted to several diplomatic steps aimed at punishing Serbia for its role in Bosnia. However, its top decision-makers were adamant not to intervene militarily in Bosnia.

Realists in Power

The Bush Administration's top national security team comprised realists. This school of thought in international relations holds that states are the primary actors in international relations which are motivated by national interests and

seek to maximize their power and security in an anarchic world. Realists are not concerned with international principles or norms and much less with international law. They emphasize self-help and a reliance on one's own resources.¹ Realists do not favour military interventions unless a national interest is at stake.

That the Bush Administration was dominated by foreign policy realists had serious implications for a newly independent country in Europe. When Bosnian Serb rebel forces assisted by Serbia undertook a campaign of genocide across Bosnia in spring 1992, the beleaguered Bosnian government looked to the West for assistance. However, there were three bad news coming from the US. First, Bosnia was not a pressing issue for the Bush Administration. With the process of Yugoslavia's demise, the Republican administration of George H. W. Bush was seeking to manage the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union, steering the process of unification of Germany, supporting democratisation of Eastern Europe, and faced a set of other foreign policy challenges. Second, the top officials in the Bush Administration were realists who did not see a vital national interest at stake warranting a military intervention. Third, the attack on Bosnia took place during an election year in which no politician wanted to send troops in harm's way. These three factors combined to ensure that the hopes of Bosnians pinned to a Western military intervention would be dashed. In fact, it would take another three-and-a-half years before a major diplomatic initiative was undertaken.

Back in 1992, the top Bush Administration officials who were realists primarily concerned with American national interests included the President himself, Secretary of State James Baker and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft. Of the several realists in power, Secretary of State James Baker was the most prominent. His approach to the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia was captured by his statement „We don't have a dog in that fight.“ This widely cited and condemned expression was uttered by Baker in private with President Bush, Brent Scowcroft and Lawrence Eagleburger. Baker's view of Yugoslavia was influenced by both Eagleburger and Scowcroft who had served in Yugoslavia.² This statement was reported widely and came to define his and Bush Administration's decision not to get involved in Bosnia. Baker recalled later that he left the issue of Bosnia to the Europeans who wanted to lead on the issue. Another reason is that neither President Bush nor Baker wanted to be involved in a crisis in Europe as they re-election campaign was in full swing.³

Like Baker, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft was also a realist who served in the Bush Administration as the war in Bosnia unfolded. He too was

¹ Stephen M. Walt, *International Relations: One World, Many Theories, Foreign Policy*, Spring 1998.

² Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Man Who Ran Washington*, New York: Doubleday 2020, 463.

³ *Ibidem*, 489-490.

opposed to an American intervention in Bosnia. In August 1992, Scowcroft said that the war in Yugoslavia was a „civil war“ and that there was no military solution to it. He also stated that a military response should be led by Europe.⁴

When the agreement on the establishment of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was reached in March 1994 between the Bosnian government and Bosnian Croats, Scowcroft – now no longer a National Security Adviser – was skeptical that it would work out.⁵ In an interview after he left office, Scowcroft recalled: „I would have been prepared to intervene with some air power, even though I don't think it would have been very effective... We would not have done much. Again, because we couldn't figure out how to solve the problem.“ He recalled also that after refusing to get involved, the Bush Administration supported the Vance-Owen plan.⁶ In short, both Baker and Scowcroft did not want to get involved in Bosnia because they did not see a national interest at stake. The 1992 presidential campaign was an additional reason that played a significant part in their decision.

Baker's and Scowcroft's views were also shared by America's best-known realist Henry Kissinger. In June 1992, Kissinger was a guest at *Charlie Rose* show. Asked about the war in Bosnia, Kissinger said: “Unfortunately, this goes back a thousand years” adding that he was “totally against military intervention by the United States.” He also said that the “Serbian slaughter of the population has to be stopped.”⁷

Academic Realists

Apart from Kissinger, a number of then-young and rising stars of realism in the American academia also weighed in on Bosnia by publishing their views in the media.

In September 1992, Robert Pape – then a professor at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies at the Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama - published an op-ed in which he argued that air power was powerless in Bosnia. Noting that the use of air power had become a dominant issue in debates over Bosnia, Pape wrote that “air power alone cannot restore the integrity of Bosnia.” He added that “a Western air campaign ... would target key sectors of the Serbian economy vital to civilians... This is unlikely to persuade Serbs to abandon their positions – and their million fellow Serbs – in Bosnia. Bosnian Serbs are even

⁴ Andrew Rosenthal, “Allied Inch Closer to Bosnia Aid Pact,” *The New York Times*, 10 August 1992.

⁵ Elaine Sciolino, “U.S. and Russians Broker New Pacts for a Bosnia Peace,” *The New York Times*, 2 March 1994.

⁶ Brent Scowcroft Interview #2, George H.W. Bush Presidential Oral History Project, Miller Center Interviews, 10-11 August 2000, p. 92.

⁷ Henry Kissinger Interview with Charlie Rose, 2 June 1992, <https://charlierose.com/videos/13277> (accessed 23 August 2022).

less likely to give in, since they face the risks of a Muslim backlash after recent atrocities." He further wrote that "blowing up bridges between Bosnia and Serbia would not be effective...".

Pape was skeptical that air power could help Bosnia. "(T)rying to restore Bosnia's original territorial integrity would be extremely dangerous. A Muslim advance into the Serb-populated areas of Bosnia would unleash further violence because Serbs would resist the twin specters of Muslim rule and war-crimes trials." Pape concluded by declaring that "air power is least effective in a civil war" and that "only a costly ground campaign can restore Bosnia."⁸ In fact, both the description of a "civil war" in Bosnia and the ineffectiveness of Western air power were completely wrong.

Next year, in February 1993, Michael Desch, then teaching at the University of California at Riverside, urged caution about military intervention in Bosnia. He wrote that, unlike Somalia, Yugoslavia's geography was suited to guerrilla warfare. He wrote that "the Yugoslav Army and Serb irregular units against which United States or United Nations forces would have to contend are heavily armed, highly-trained, and extremely well-organized." Desch agreed with then-Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell that an intervention in Bosnia would produce a quagmire and referred to the historical example of Axis powers and the guerrilla resistance in World War Two to argue against intervention in the 1990s. Desch also pointed out that air strikes on Serbia would only lead Serbian people to back the Milošević regime. Like Pape, Desch wrote that air strikes to demolish supplies from Serbia to Bosnian Serb forces would also be ineffective.

Most astonishingly, Desch claimed that air strikes on Bosnian Serb forces in Bosnia would not achieve much as they were "conducting their war of ethnic cleansing with small arms and in small groups. Against these sorts of forces, air power is almost useless." This argument was in sharp contrast to the beginning of the article where Desch pointed out that Serb forces were "highly armed." As with other realists, he argued that the U.S. did not have a national interest in Bosnia and question whether the West could do anything to put a stop to the carnage. The only feasible option that Desch put forth was that the West could arm and train Bosnian Muslim forces so that they could defend themselves against Serb onslaught.⁹

The following month, in March 1993, John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago published an op-ed declaring that the Vance-Owen peace plan was dead. Of all the realists in the American academia, Mearsheimer was the most detailed in suggesting specific steps that the U.S should take. And, most of these recommendations were highly problematic.

⁸ Robert A. Pape, Jr. „Air Power Alone Is Powerless in This War,“ *Los Angeles Times*, 2 September 1992.

⁹ Michael C. Desch, „History Warns That Fighting in Bosnia Would Be 'Quagmire',“ *The Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 1993.

Mearsheimer called for a new peace plan. First, he urged that the West establish ethnically homogeneous states including through population transfers. He called for establishing a Muslim state on one-third of Bosnia's territory that would include all Muslims from the rest of Bosnia. The rest of the Bosnian territory, according to Mearsheimer, would be given to Serbia and Croatia. Second, Mearsheimer called for a Balkans-wide settlement. He noted that Serbia avoided fighting wars on several fronts. Third, he called for U.S and its allies to threaten Serbia with military force to ensure their acceptance of the grand deal. "If Serbia does not accept a settlement, the U.S. should bypass the U.N. arms embargo and send weapons and ammunition to the Bosnian Muslims, the Croatians and perhaps the Albanians", Mearsheimer noted. Resorting to balance of power thinking, Mearsheimer added that "The emphasis should be on letting Serbia's enemies balance the Serbians. Under no circumstances should the U.S. send ground forces to the Balkans, even as part of a NATO peacekeeping force."¹⁰

In June 1993, Mearsheimer and Pape jointly published a partition plan for Bosnia. They noted that "the Western powers want peace in the Balkans and don't want to spend much blood and treasure to achieve it." Given that this was the case, Mearsheimer and Pape argued for partition stating "it is the only plan that doesn't deny the reality of what has happened, does not acquiesce in the decimation of the Bosnian Muslims and has a chance of being enforced without a major military embroilment."¹¹

The authors dismissed the then much-discussed Vance-Owen peace plan as a failure which would be very costly to implement. They wrote that the plan was to establish a weak central Bosnian state that would find it daunting to impose it will on the erstwhile separatists. To implement such a peace deal for Bosnia, Mearsheimer and Pape argued that 400,000 NATO troops would be required. For them, Bosnia resembled Vietnam much more than Kuwait and they advised that NATO does not pursue this avenue.¹² The authors also dismissed the safe areas option as a disastrous plan that would either require more Western ground troops or would leave Bosnian Muslims even more vulnerable.

Mearsheimer and Pape argued that partition, in the given circumstances, was the best option. They further argued that Bosnia should be divided into ethnically homogeneous states with the Serb and Croat statelets able to join their kin-states. The authors argued that a Bosnian Muslim state should be "militarily and economically viable. It must form a single, compact whole."

What is interesting is that Mearsheimer and Pape laid out the specific contours of the future Bosnian Muslim state which they envisioned and which is worth quoting: "The Bosnian-Muslim state should be centered on Sarajevo and cover a large portion of the eastern half of what was pre-war Bosnia-Herzegovina. The northern border should run from Teslic to Tuzla to the western

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, „Shrink Bosnia to Save It,“ *The New York Times*, 31 March 1993.

¹¹ John J. Mearsheimer and Robert A. Pape, „The Answer,“ *The New Republic*, 14 June 1993, 22.

¹² *Ibidem*, 22-23.

bank of the Drina River near Loznica...The western border should run from Teslic to Zenica to Konjic. This is mountainous terrain, and the Bosna River serves as a fallback line of defense. The southern border should run from Konjic along the Neretva River straight to the Serbian border. The Neretva Valley, with its high ridges, is a strong line of defense. The eastern border should run along the present border between Serbia and Bosnia up to Loznica..."¹³ Under this partition plan, Bosnian Croats would get most of southwestern Bosnia. Serbs would get Bihać in exchange for Muslims retaining territory in eastern Bosnia. Serbs would get a corridor connecting Serbia to Serb-controlled regions in Bosnia and Croatia. A relocation of populations would be undertaken to establish homogeneous territories.¹⁴ In fact, they modelled their plan for this on the Greece-Turkey population exchange agreement and urged that the UN oversee this process in Bosnia.

Mearsheimer and Pape called for the West to arm Bosnian Muslims arguing that Muslims lost territory not due to a lack of troops but because of a lack of arms. Their logic is that arming the Bosnian Muslims would "equalize the balance" with Serbs. In a precursor to what would be later implemented in Bosnia, Mearsheimer and Pape called for a program to "train and equip the Muslim forces." The authors concede that this new Bosnian Muslim state would be weak and, particularly so, when compared to Serbia. Their solution was straightforward: NATO should arm this state and provide security guarantees. They also urged NATO to facilitate an alliance between Albania, Croatia and the Bosnian Muslim state.¹⁵ The realists also conceded that their plan was neither perfect nor fully moral but argued it was the best option.

Unlike Mearsheimer or Pape, Kissinger did not lay out specific step that the U.S. should take. In late 1994, Kissinger was again a guest at *Charlie Rose*. He said that "the first mistake that was made was to create a Bosnian state in the present dimensions in which Serbs, Muslims and Croats who could not live together in large Yugoslavia were being asked to live together in a geographic region that had never been a nation... The area should have been partitioned from the beginning which is the present peace plan." He added that "it is a classical Balkan civil war."¹⁶ Kissinger's statements in 1994, like those two years earlier, were factually incorrect both in terms of Bosnian statehood and the nature of the war in the country.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 23-24.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 28.

¹⁶ Henry Kissinger interview with Charlie Rose, 28 November 1994, <https://charlierose.com/videos/26471> (accessed 23 August 2022).

Post-Dayton Realist Outlook

After the Dayton peace talks were concluded, Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera of MIT published an article criticizing the accords as “an unfinished peace, hence a flawed peace.” They called the Dayton agreement a *de facto* partition. In fact, the authors called it bipartite partition – for dividing Bosnia into Republika Srpska and the Federation. One of their major criticisms was that the Muslim-Croat Federation was “untenable.” They predicted that Bosnian Croats would be outnumbered by Bosnian Muslims and they would “demand their own state or insist on joining a Greater Croatia.”¹⁷ Mearsheimer and Evera argued that Croatia would be working to undermine the Federation as it had worked to carve up Bosnia previously. In fact, they noted that Bosnian Croats only reluctantly agreed to join the Federation. The authors also stated that American officials made a mistake in not proceeding with dividing the Federation into Muslim and Croat states. Both further predicted that the Federation would collapse and they predicted violence erupting between Muslims and Croats barring partition.

Mearsheimer and Evera charged that the Dayton Peace Accords were “incomplete” and “unstable” and questioned the success potential of U.S.-led peacekeeping. They posited that a potential scenario is that violence may erupt after the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) is deployed to Bosnia.¹⁸

The authors argued that the U.S. should not have signed Dayton but proceeded with a tripartite division of Bosnia. But, now that the Dayton agreement was reached, Mearsheimer and Evera argued that the U.S. needed to undertake two steps. First, the U.S. had to preside over the partition of the Federation between Muslims and Croats. Second, the U.S. had to arm the Bosnian Muslims and provide them with a defense capability. For these realists, arming the Muslims was a way of establishing a balance of power on the ground which would safeguard the fragile peace. In fact, they clearly write that “the U.S. goal should be to give the Muslims a strong self-defense capability, adequate to deter new Croat or Serb aggression.”¹⁹

The best-known American realist Henry Kissinger once again weighed in on Bosnia after the Dayton peace talks concluded. In his writings, Kissinger referred to a “civil war,” claimed that Bosnia was established in 1991 and assigned blame to all actors. In September 1995, Kissinger wrote that “The appalling conduct of the Serbs (matched by the conduct of the other parties at various stages) fits the category of aggression less than of a historical Balkan ethnic conflict. In 1991 Bosnia was recklessly created by the Western countries as a multi-ethnic state through the device of recognizing the administrative boundaries of the provinces of the former Yugoslavia as international borders.”²⁰

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, „When Peace Means War,“ *The New Republic*, 18 December 1995, 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 21.

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, „Bosnia: Only Just Beginning...,“ *The Washington Post*, 11 September 1995.

Kissinger claimed that „But now that each of the communities, using the most inhuman methods, has expelled the others from its area of control, it makes no sense to try to impose a multi-ethnic solution for all of Bosnia-Herzegovina.“ To achieve stability in Bosnia, Kissinger advocated that „the only responsible outcome is to define Bosnia as a state for the Muslim community within generous borders and to give the other communities the right of self-determination.“²¹

After conclusion of the Dayton peace talks, in December 1995, Kissinger reiterated that the U.S had not national interest in sending troops to Bosnia. He stated that „negotiated outcomes to civil wars are rarely clear-cut, and this is neither the first nor the last agreement made possible by ambiguity.“ Kissinger argued that „American negotiators have created a mythology of Bosnian national reconciliation. Perhaps the most flagrant example of this is the so-called Bosnian Federation... it is naive to expect the Croat-Muslim marriage of convenience to last indefinitely.“ Kissinger then repeated his view from the September op-ed by stating: „Bosnia has never been a sovereign multi-ethnic state. It was a mistake to establish it as such in 1991. Persisting in that error guarantees an open-ended war.“ He offered several conclusions including: „Creating a recognized Muslim entity standing on its own feet and protected by NATO might in the long run be more conducive to stability than the envisaged unitary state.“ He reiterated his opposition to the use of US troops for nation-building in Bosnia.²²

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Kissinger said he was conflicted about the Dayton agreement and added “I do not want to oppose the President’s deployment of troops...” He asked “Why are we there” and conceded that he was ambiguous about the American role in the implementation of the peace agreement. Kissinger added that “arming the Muslims ... seems to me a perfectly reasonable thing to do.” He spoke of the potential for violence erupting among various actors on the ground in Bosnia and called the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina a “fraud.” Kissinger was highly skeptical of the Dayton agreement and said “I cannot see how this can function as a unitary state.” He was also skeptical of the functioning of the Federation adding that “within two years, the tensions between the Croats and the Muslims will be as great as the tensions between the Muslims and the Serbs.”²³

While not all realists held the same views on the war in Bosnia nor suggested identical policy options, there were several common themes that defined their position. Realists, and particularly academic realists, managed to get several issues right while also failing dismally on certain crucial questions

²¹ Henry Kissinger, „Bosnia: Only Just Beginning...“, *The Washington Post*, 11 September 1995.

²² Henry Kissinger, „Bosnia: Reasons for Care“, *The Washington Post*, 10 December 1995.

²³ Henry Kissinger interview with Charlie Rose, 21 November 1995, <https://charlierose.com/videos/12214> (accessed 23 August 2022).

What Did Realists Get Right?

First, academic realists were right in that balance of power leads to security. When Bosnian Serb rebel forces attacked Bosnia with the assistance of neighbouring Serbia, the legitimate government in Sarajevo faced an unprecedented hurdle. The UN-imposed arms embargo that was in force since 1991 effectively curtailed Bosnia's ability to defend itself. When the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina started getting certain supplies and establishing new facts on the ground, the rebel forces' ability to occupy territories and commit crimes diminished rapidly.

Second, in 1993, Pape and Mearsheimer in their joint article called for an "equip and train" program for Bosnian Muslims. In fact, this plan was implemented in the post-Dayton Bosnia. Their policy recommendation built on the balance of power idea. While the exact ownership of the idea demands further research, Pape and Mearsheimer suggested it at least two and a half years before it was implemented. In a different article, Mearsheimer and Evera called for arming Bosnian Muslims and giving them a self-defense capability. This was essentially the same idea as that put forth earlier by Mearsheimer and Evera.

Third, academic realists predicted major problems in the functioning of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mearsheimer and Evera predicted that Croatia would work to undermine Bosnia. In fact, twenty five years after the Dayton negotiations, the functioning of the Federation is a major problem. The prediction back then that Croatia would undermine Bosnia has also turned out to be true. This has been the case for the past several years and shows no sign of abating.

Fourth, both Mearsheimer and Evera predicted that the return of refugees as provided for in Dayton would not materialize except for a few cases. This was the much-lauded Annex 7 of the agreement. While there was much hope that a return of refugees would annul the results of genocide, the idea of a mass refugee returns for the most part did not materialize.

What Did Realists Get Wrong?

While getting at least four claims right, a number of views and predictions by realists proved spectacularly wrong.

First, Kissinger falsely talked about Bosnia as a state established in 1991. For anyone even remotely acquainted with the history of the Balkans, this falsehood is jarring. Furthermore, Bosnia's independence is not the source of war; it was Serbia's quest for territorial aggrandizement and control with the ultimate goal of forming a Greater Serbia.

Second, Kissinger falsely claimed that there was a "civil war" in Bosnia. This was a view also shared by Scowcroft. It was clear as soon as the attack on Bosnia commenced that this was an aggression by neighbouring Serbia in support

of Bosnian Serb rebel forces. These secessionists and their enablers from across the River Drina began a campaign of genocide against the Bosniak Muslim population which lasted from 1992 until 1995.

Third, Pape and Desch both argued that air power would be ineffective. Incredibly, both argued that air strikes on rebel forces supply lines and on targets in Serbia would produce no result. Desch even claimed that air strikes on Bosnian Serb targets would be ineffective. In fact, Bosnian government officials were repeatedly calling for air strikes as a way of rolling back Bosnian Serb rebel forces. As the NATO air strikes in 1995 showed, Bosnian Serb rebel forces backed down when faced with several days of air bombardment. This proved that NATO-led or US-led air strikes in 1992 or 1993 could have had a major deterrence effect. Similarly, as the NATO air war over Kosovo in 1999 showed, the Slobodan Milošević regime backed down when faced with a superior military power. On the issue of airpower, both Pape and Desch completely underestimated the extent to which air strikes could alleviate the suffering in Bosnia and push back the aggression.

Fourth, several realists predicted that violence would erupt in a post-war Bosnia. In fact, one of the positive aspects of the Dayton Peace Accords is that there was no renewed violence since 1995. It is clear that American realists got this prediction wrong.

Fifth, all realists were against a deployment of ground troops to Bosnia. Some realists also argued that there would be attacks on the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR). In fact, what was remarkable about the post-war peacekeeping is that there was no single IFOR casualty as a result of hostile fire. It also showed that Bosnian Serb rebel forces never challenged a serious military force.

Summary

While neglected in the academic literature on the US policy towards Bosnia during the early 1990s, the role and views of American realists deserve scholarly attention for at least two reasons. First, several top officials of the George H. W. Bush Administration were realists who did not favour a military intervention in Bosnia. This effectively meant that their worldview shaped their hierarchy of priorities and that Bosnia was not one of them. Combined with the 1992 re-election campaign, the realist outlook is a major factor that explains the Administration's reluctant response to the war.

Baker's statement that „We don't have a dog in that fight“ was a direct reflection of realists' approach to Bosnia. In fact, it came to define the Bush Administration's Bosnia policy. It may not have been clear to many Bosnians at the time but, with realists in power, a military intervention throughout 1992 was essentially off-the-table.

The second reason why it is important to study realists is that they took part in the American public debate on Bosnia and what should be done about it. By offering their views and policy recommendations, academic realists sought to shape the public discourse and policy on Bosnia. The Clinton Administration for the most part did not adopt such recommendations as its policy. Still, studying the role of realists provides a more nuanced understanding of what was discussed in the American public sphere about Bosnia from 1992 to 1995.

Analysing realists from the hindsight of three decades later also provides an overview of what they got right and wrong. While no one could have accurately predicted how events in Bosnia would unfold after the Dayton Peace Accords, academic realists like Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera were very specific in their predictions. This enables researchers to determine how their predictions measured up to reality.

This article analysed the publicly aired views of Kissinger, Pape, Desch, Mearsheimer and Evera from 1992 to 1995. Of these Kissinger was pessimistic without offering specifics. Pape and Desch were opposed to the use of air strikes. Mearsheimer wrote in a detailed fashion and offered specific policy options and predictions. Taken together, academic realists were not a homogeneous group offering identical ideas.

In sum, academic realists failed to call early on for an arming of the Bosnian government that would have established a balance of power on the ground. Most worrisome was Pape's and Desch's completely false assertion that Western air strikes on Bosnian Serb targets and targets in Serbia proper would be ineffective. This assertion was proven wrong in August and September 1995 when NATO air strikes punished Bosnian Serb forces.

What was also striking was the extent to which some realists overestimated the Bosnian Serb forces and their enablers in Serbia. As scholars of international relations, they ended up severely underestimating America's and NATO's ability to roll back rebel forces and shape outcomes in Bosnia.

For a school of thought that respects force and facts on the ground, academic realists in the US failed to appreciate how effective Western air strikes could be and eventually did become.

Zaključak

Iako zapostavljeno u akademskoj literaturi o američkoj politici prema Bosni tijekom ranih 1990-ih, uloga i stavovi američkih realista zaslužuju pažnju stručnjaka iz najmanje dva razloga. Prvo, nekoliko visokih dužnosnika Administracije Georgea H. W. Busha bili su realisti koji nisu podržavali vojnu intervenciju u Bosni. To je efikasno značilo da je njihov svjetonazor oblikovao njihovu hijerarhiju prioriteta i da Bosna nije bila među njima. U kombinaciji s kampanjom za ponovni izbor 1992. godine, realistički pogled predstavlja glavni faktor koji objašnjava nevoljeli odgovor Administracije na rat.

Bakerova izjava da “Nemamo ništa s tim sukobom” bila je izravan odraz realizma prema Bosni. Zapravo, ona je definirala politiku Administracije Bush prema Bosni. Možda to tada nije bilo jasno mnogim Bosancima, ali s realizmima na vlasti, vojna intervencija tijekom 1992. godine praktički nije bila opcija.

Drugi razlog zašto je važno proučavati realizme jest taj što su sudjelovali u američkoj javnoj raspravi o Bosni i o tome što treba učiniti u vezi s tim. Nudeći svoje stavove i preporuke za politiku, akademski realisti nastojali su oblikovati javni diskurs i politiku o Bosni. Administracija Klintona većinu tih preporuka nije usvojila kao svoju politiku. Ipak, proučavanje uloge realizma pruža nijansiranije razumijevanje onoga što se raspravljalo u američkom javnom prostoru o Bosni od 1992. do 1995. godine.

Analiza realizama iz perspektive tri desetljeća kasnije također pruža pregled onoga što su oni ispravno i nisu ispravno predvidjeli. Iako nitko nije mogao točno predvidjeti kako će se događaji u Bosni razvijati nakon Daytonskih mirovnih sporazuma, akademski realizmi poput Mearsheimera i Stephena Van Evera bili su vrlo precizni u svojim predviđanjima. To omogućava istraživačima da utvrde koliko su se njihova predviđanja pokazala tačnima.

Ovaj članak analizira javno izražene stavove Kissingera, Papea, Descha, Mearsheimera i Evera od 1992. do 1995. godine. Od njih je Kissinger bio pesimističan bez konkretizacije. Pape i Desch su bili protiv upotrebe zračnih udara. Mearsheimer je pisao na detaljan način i ponudio konkretna politička rješenja i predviđanja. Sveukupno, akademski realizmi nisu bili homogena grupa koja je nudila identične ideje.

U zaključku, akademski realizmi nisu ranije pozivali na naoružavanje vlade Bosne koje bi uspostavilo ravnotežu snaga na terenu. Najviše zabrinjavajuća bila je potpuno netačna tvrdnja Papea i Descha da bi zapadni zračni udari na ciljeve bosanskih Srba i ciljeve u Srbiji bili neučinkoviti. Ova tvrdnja je dokazano bila netačna u augustu i septembru 1995. godine kada su NATO-ovi zračni udari kažnjavali snage bosanskih Srba.

Također je bilo iznenađujuće koliko su neki realizmi precijenili snage bosanskih Srba i njihovih pomagača u Srbiji. Kao stručnjaci za međunarodne odnose, na kraju su podcijenili sposobnost Amerike i NATO-a da zaustave pobunjeničke snage i oblikuju ishode u Bosni.

Za školu mišljenja koja poštuje silu i činjenice na terenu, akademski realizmi u SAD-u nisu shvatili koliko učinkoviti mogu biti zapadni zračni udari, koji su se na kraju i ostvarili.

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