

Occupying Srpska

By David Binder

Over the past four months, the NATO arm for Bosnia and Herzegovina called the Stabilization Force (SFOR) has been transformed by the Clinton administration into an occupation authority in the Serbian portion of the land. It acts mostly on orders of American political officials, including those of the nominally independent Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

This occupation role, reminiscent of the governance of the victorious Allies in Germany after World War II, has begun to pervade sectors of public life well beyond NATO's original pacification mission of separating hostile ethnic forces and diminishing their arsenals.

The agenda of the occupation policy for Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity, was sketched in a notable speech by Samuel Berger, the National Security Adviser, on Sept. 23: rolling back ethnic partition by returning Muslim refugees to their homes; controlling the media; ousting recalcitrant politicians; seizing more war crimes suspects.

Already in July, NATO units launched covert operations to seize putative war criminals. Since then together with the OSCE, the military alliance has participated in high-profile propaganda actions (unyielding Serb politicians are routinely denounced as "thugs"), helped manipulate parliamentary election results, and blocked movement on the roads of Serbs deemed inimical to Washington's goals. To further these aims, the occupation authorities have created a puppet government in Banja Luka under the otherwise powerless Republika Srpska president, Biljana Plavsic.

In one of these actions, the seizure of four television transmitters on Oct. 1, the intention declared by Gen. Wesley Clark, the NATO commander and Friend of Bill, is to alter the editorial content of broadcasts previously controlled by the Bosnian Serb leadership in Pale. The basic objection to those broadcasts was that they were "anti-NATO." One wonders whether Mr. Clark will award himself and his troops the Combat Television Badge — for bravery in front of the screen.

The occupation tactics have played rather well in the establishment press

(despite the fact that such actions would be rejected as un-American if attempted here), less so in Europe because they are perceived as underwriting the administration's new policy of extending the international military presence in Bosnia well beyond the formal cutoff for SFOR in July, 1998. The indefinite future was not what Congress and others had in mind when authorizing and then extending the mandate for American troops there.

For the first time a gap has opened between the administration's vision for Bosnia and the realities on the ground as viewed by a small but vocal band of critics who are now branded as "partitionists."

Concerning the reality that for nearly seven years Bosnia has been partitioned on ethnic lines, Mr. Berger declared that allowing this to continue is "wrong because accepting partition means ratifying the worst ethnic cleansing in Europe in more than half a century." His tone was defensive toward what he called "the partitionists" — prominently including Henry Kissinger and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas.

Yet there may be a far sounder rationale for extending the NATO mission in Bosnia than Mr. Berger's fantasy to "form a single nation" out of the mutually hostile Muslims, Croats and Serbs.

Perversely, such a rationale grows out of the Clinton administration's unilateral "equip and train" program, which has armed the Bosnian Muslim forces with \$300 million worth of top-of-the-line mainly American tanks, howitzers, field guns, transport vehicles and battlefield electronics. Some 200 retired American officers and noncoms were hired essentially as mercenaries to train these forces.

While Mr. Berger airily claimed that the program "is helping create a more stable military balance," expert observers on the ground have become convinced that the Muslims now possess overwhelming superiority and if ever NATO leaves the fields and mountains of Bosnia, the Muslim forces could and would strike at the divided, demoralized and now poorly armed Serbs.

So to those who argue that it is wrong for Americans to create an occupation force in Republika Srpska and wrong to ignore the reality of Bosnia's ethnic partitions, those two wrongs might make a right if it means prolonging the international presence simply to maintain a fragile peace.

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