This Time We Knew

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Editors' note: This chapter was written as a response to an article published by Warren Zimmermann in the prestigious journal Foreign Affairs. The article is a reflective piece in which Zimmermann considers the personalities and political personae of the various Balkan leaders and speculates on the causes of the country's breakup. As the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, Zimmermann was obliged to hold to the official American position, which was unequivocally in favor of maintaining the federation. In discussing the issue with his diplomatic colleagues in Belgrade, Zimmermann reports that “the worse case [scenario] we could think of was the breakup of the country.” Zimmermann favors the preservation of a loose federation under the leadership of the new prime minister, Ante Markovich (a Croat), and expresses disdain for “naked nationalism” and the nationalistic leaders who were gaining popularity in the constituent republics of the former Yugoslavia.

Zimmermann's analysis is a remarkable document both as an autobiographical account of a committed American diplomat and as an example of American diplomatic thinking about the Balkans. While his strongest distaste is reserved for Slobodan Milošević (whom he characterizes as cynical and mendacious, but not wholly responsible for the aggression he unleashed) and the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić (who,
he says, "invites comparison with a monster from another generation, Heinrich Himmler"), he also provides rather strident critiques of other republics and leaders of the former Yugoslavia. Zimmermann wisely points out that the failure of Western resolve in the early days of the war allowed the Serbs to "push about as far as their power could take them."

Only part of Slaven Letica's response published below was published in Foreign Affairs. This response was written as a rejection of the idea that all sides (and all Balkan leaders) were equally guilty either for the breakup of Yugoslavia or for the resulting aggression. We print the response in its entirety here, together with an excerpt (attached as an appendix) from Letica's diary of events surrounding his visit, as national security advisor to Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, to the White House on September 25, 1990, and his meeting with Henry Kissinger. Letica's observations demonstrate that the Bush administration was adamantly opposed to the idea of nationhood for the former republics of Yugoslavia and supported federalism in spite of the fact that war might be the result of a commitment to federalism. Kissinger's position, as understood by Letica, is an indication of the realpolitik attitude of many Western intellectuals, an attitude strengthened by strongly held negative and often prejudicial attitudes about the various ethnic groups involved in the Balkan conflict. Kissinger's position on the Balkan crisis could best be described as cautious and appears to be grounded in a view that all sides are more or less to blame for the crisis there. In an editorial in the New York Post in which he urges caution in defining the role of U.S. peacekeeping troops in Bosnia, Kissinger writes, "While the Serbs initiated the present round of slaughter, they would no doubt hearken back to comparable depredations inflicted by Croats and Muslims. Early resistance by the West to ethnic cleansing might well have stopped the outrage, but too many brutalities have been wrought by all groups to envision coexistence under a single government as a realistic option." 1 In another passage, he notes that "The three ethnic groups have in effect been separated by the revolting ethnic cleansing they have practiced." 2 Such attitudes—namely, seeing all parties as somehow guilty for the devastation of Yugoslavia—might explain Kissinger's earlier response to new leaders of a small nation such as Croatia.

Letica's article is included here as a "perspective from within," a response from one of the elites deeply involved in the affairs of the reformation of postcommunist Yugoslavia. Such a perspective is often lacking in favor of some of the convenient frames of analysis that are
imposed on the Balkan crisis, many of which are discussed in the introduction to this volume. His essay should be read as part of a more general phenomenology of the birth of new nations in Eastern and Central Europe.

Warren Zimmermann’s article “The Last Ambassador: A Memoir of the Collapse of Yugoslavia,” published in Foreign Affairs, is a remarkably interesting account written by a man with an undeniable literary talent. At the same time, it is an important historical document because it was not written by just any casual voyeur of Balkan postcommunist democratic revolutions and wars, such as a journalist or a scientist, but by one of the few foreign diplomats who had a hand in creating history, and had a real opportunity to change its course, because he was the last American ambassador to Yugoslavia, from 1989 to 1992.

Since I myself played a similar—although not so important—role as witness to and participant in the events described by the former U.S. ambassador, it seems logical for me to present the story from my perspective. (I was the personal advisor to the Croatian president from April 1990 to March 1991. I resigned when I learned that Franjo Tuđman was planning a meeting with Slobodan Milošević, and that his advisors had been ordered to make maps for the division of Bosnia and the “humane” transfer of populations.)

It must be said from the outset that Zimmermann’s “Memoir” is a typically American view of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the causes of the conflict, but it is also an interesting account of his experiences with the key protagonists in this tragic event. The “American” aspect of the story is patent insofar as the author assesses Balkan vicissitudes through the lens of what Robert N. Bellah calls the (American) “habits of the heart” or “American civil religion,” and what has been called the “American social character” by other authors. In practice, this means that Warren Zimmermann observes all processes, people and events in the former Yugoslavia through the lens of a political “religion” that firmly upholds sacred ideals such as individualism, federalism, the rule of law, liberal democracy, and cultural tolerance, and sincerely despises any form of racism, xenophobia, nationalism, authoritarianism, or “Balkanization.” This is why Zimmermann’s memoir is a kind of “American mirror,” or the West Side Story of the Croatian, Slovenian, Bosnian, and Serb consciousness and reality in the period between 1989 and 1992.
It is a *West Side Story* in the sense that the United States has romanticized
and oversimplified the complex realities of the former Yugoslavia by
portraying all parties as simply members of competing gangs.

All the key figures in that reality—Slobodan Milošević, Vuk Drašković, Franjo Tudjman, Radovan Karadžić, Vojislav Šešelj, Alija Izetbegović, Kiro Gligorov, Ante Marković, and the author himself—
were known personally to Zimmermann, who gained, as he believed, an
almost psychoanalytical insight into their social-psychological being.

For the U.S. ambassador, love is the justification for his outspoken and
sincere account—sometimes not very considerate of the protagonists' feelings—of the leaders, peoples, and events that have been rocking
Europe and the world for five years. At the beginning of his article, he
says of Lawrence Eagleburger and himself that they “shared a love of the country [Yugoslavia] and its people.” As far as his love of Yugoslavia
and the “Yugoslav people” is concerned, I can confirm the following:
everyone who has met and known him can testify that his love for the
people and sights of the former Yugoslavia was deep and sincere (I had
the pleasure of meeting him several times: we dined together three times,
in the company of President Tudjman, and we also took part in a VIP
tennis tournament at Rogla, Slovenia, in 1990, after which the Serb press
accused us both of having conspired to break up Yugoslavia under the
guise of playing tennis).

The U.S. public and even Croatian readers will regard with sympathy
his sincere albeit belated admission, no longer of any avail to all the
victims of Serb aggression, that at the time of the destruction of Vukovar
and the shelling of Dubrovnik, nobody, including himself, had done
anything (such as urging the use of force) to prevent the suffering or to
halt it once it had begun: “Yet no Western government at the time called
on NATO’s military force to get the JNA to stop shelling Dubrovnik,
although NATO’s supreme commander, General John Galvin, had prepared contingency plans for doing so. The use of force was simply too
big a step to consider in late 1991. I did not recommend it myself—a
major mistake.”

Unfortunately, this laconic sentence, “I did not recommend it myself—
a major mistake,” hides the missed opportunity to create a different,
happier history that would have put a definite end to the JNA (Yugoslav
Federal Army) aggression toward Croatia and prevented all the atrocities
of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Unfortunately, Warren Zimmermann’s
real—but blind and platonic—love for “Yugoslavia” and the “Yugoslavs” was not only for the natural beauty and the people, but also embraced the state and the political system, which Zimmermann believed were worthy of not only his personal love, but also the love of the United States. He obviously thought that for Tito’s Yugoslavia, which he knew well, to be worthy of general (i.e., Serb, Croat, Slovenian, American, Albanian, etc.) love, it only needed true Westernization or Americanization, that is, democracy, true federalism, true protection of human rights, and a true market economy. I would like here to repeat his words: “a [second] major mistake.”

In the early 1990s, and in 1995, Warren Zimmermann saw the vision and reality of such a federalist, multicultural, democratic, and market-oriented Yugoslavia only in the personality and reformist project of Ante Marković. In his story, Ante Marković is the only positive, albeit naive and tragic, figure.

In general, it can be said that the key to understanding all Zimmermann’s sound judgments as well as his preconceived ideas, errors, and mistaken views (and wrong decisions) regarding the events and people in the former Yugoslavia is to be found in his attitude to nationalism: “Nationalism is by nature uncivil, antidemocratic and separatist because it empowers one ethnic group over all others.”

With his deeply ingrained American “civil religion,” discussed above, which is aware only of separatist nationalism (and which attaches an a priori negative meaning to the very notion of confederalism, let alone secession), Warren Zimmermann could not understand, and still does not seem to understand, the essence of Greater Serbian postcommunist nationalism. This nationalism is basically “federalist” and “antiseparatist,” that is, its goal is either absolute national domination (based on the dogma of the superiority of the Serb people) or military conquest.

Zimmermann’s culturally imposed or learned inability to grasp the expansionist, imperialist, and criminal nature of Greater Serbian nationalism (which logically led to concentration camps, ritual and mass murder, rape, and the destruction of all material signs of the historical presence of non-Serb populations in the conquered territories) affects his judgment throughout the article. Since he is not aware of and does not recognize “federalist” (i.e., “expansionist”) nationalism, Zimmermann does not see Slobodan Milošević as a nationalist: “Milošević is an opportunist driven by power rather than nationalism.” Throughout Zimmermann’s article
we see this reduction of nationalism to separatism and the unawareness of the fatal fact that in the case of Milošević we are faced with the worst form of militant national socialism.

Comparing the Serbian and Croatian presidents, Zimmermann says, “Unlike Milošević, who is driven by power, Tudjman is obsessed by nationalism.” In general terms, Zimmermann sees no nationalism in Serbia, but only “Milošević’s aggressive tactics.” While he sees various forms of “naked nationalism” in Slovenia and Croatia, in Serbia he sees only a form of power politics.

Zimmermann calls Slovenian nationalism “Garbo nationalism” and describes it in the following words: “They just wanted to be left alone. Their vice was selfishness. In their drive to separate from Yugoslavia they simply ignored the 22 million Yugoslavs who were not Slovenes. They bear considerable responsibility for the bloodbath that followed their secession.” At another point, he notes, strangely, that “Contrary to the general view, it was Slovenes who started the war.” There is no doubt that he saw the position and role of the Slovenes and Slovenia through the prism of the American Civil War, in which the separatist South (in this case the secessionist northwest) was cast as the bad guy.

However, Croatian nationalism is definitely the worst kind of nationalism in his story: “Croatian nationalism is defined by Tudjman—intolerant, anti-Serb, and authoritarian. These attributes—together with an aura of wartime fascism, which Tudjman has done nothing to dispel—help explain why many Serbs in Croatia reject Croatian rule, and why the core hostility in the former Yugoslavia is still between Serbs and Croats.”

Only pages later does he generously concede, “Albanian nationalism was, like Croatian nationalism, to some degree a reaction to Milošević’s aggressive tactics.”

“Serbian nationalism” as a phrase appears only once in his article: “During 1990, Serbian nationalism under Milošević became even more aggressive.” It is quite obvious that Zimmermann is unaware of it as a cultural and political phenomenon in its own right. There are only individual Serb leaders who may be fanatical, extreme, and monstrous nationalists. Some of them are “fanatic nationalists like Vojislav Šešelj,” others, such as Vuk Drašković, are “pro-Serbian extremists,” yet others, like Radovan Karadžić, are “monsters”—but “Serbian nationalism” does not exist as a collective evil. In Zimmermann’s consciousness, it cannot exist, because he knows and recognizes only separatist nationalism.

All Zimmermann’s views on the key protagonists of these events stem
from his utterly negative attitude toward any form of separatist nationalism and his benevolent attitude toward “federalist” nationalism (in Slavic languages, this form of nationalism is encompassed by the notion of “unitarism,” which has very negative connotations), even when it is based on a racist and militarist ideology of the all-Serbs-in-one-state type and the method of genocide called “ethnic cleansing.”

Thus, Radovan Karadžić and Ante Marković are seen as representing opposite poles, Karadžić as the epitome of the bad guy, and Marković as his antipode, with all other figures situated somewhere in between. The position and labels attributed to Radovan Karadžić correspond to his true demonic nature and the crimes he has ordered or tacitly condoned, but they also reflect the author’s system of values. For Zimmermann, Radovan Karadžić is both a war criminal and a “separatist nationalist” aspiring to break up Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is seen by Zimmermann as the surrogate of the ideal state: federalist, democratic, multicultural. Here is how Zimmermann describes Karadžić: “He was the architect of massacres in the Muslim villages, ethnic cleansing, and artillery attacks on civilian populations. In his fanaticism, ruthlessness, and contempt for human values, he invites comparison with a monster from another generation, Heinrich Himmler.”

Although Zimmermann’s use of the metaphor “architect of massacres” is questionable—since the concepts of ethnic cleansing and territorial conquest had already been established in Serbia—all his other judgments on Karadžić are quite sound. Karadžić can be called only the high priest and practitioner of massacres, not its architect, since that label would imply that he was the intellectual creator of the idea of such evil (that he worked out the technique and timing of the crimes, and probably ordered them to be committed). The following descriptions and opinions are also valid: “his disdain for the truth was absolute” and “his apartheid philosophy was as extreme as anything concocted in South Africa.”

On the other hand, the author presents Ante Marković as the absolute opposite of the demonic Radovan Karadžić. In a way, Marković is the ideal (but quite unrealistic) expression of the American “Yugoslav dream,” which is based on the belief in human rights, democracy, federalism, and the “melting pot of nations.” Describing Ante Marković, Zimmermann describes and justifies himself and the American policy that, even after the destruction of Vukovar and the attack on Dubrovnik, kept their faith in the last Yugoslav prime minister: “Marković still departed as a symbol of everything his country needed: a modern, stable economy,
the rule of law, ethnic tolerance. He had treated Yugoslavia like a patient with a serious cancer—nationalism. A semi-heroic, semi-tragic figure, Marković failed, but at least he had fought the cancer instead of adjusting to it. He had aspired to be Yugoslavia’s savior. Instead, he turned out to be the Yugoslavian equivalent of Russia’s last leader before the Bolshevik deluge, Aleksandr Kerensky.”

The literary phrase “he had fought the cancer instead of adjusting to it” unerringly suggests that in the eyes of the last ambassador, Marković is some kind of mythical, unquestionably tragic hero, who is aware of the futility of his tragic sacrifice, but consciously chooses his fate. Unfortunately, Ante Marković is, like Warren Zimmermann himself, more of a loser. I myself can testify that he deeply believed he would win the polls in Bosnia and ultimately defeat Slobodan Milošević, Milan Kučan, and Franjo Tudjman.

By describing Ante Marković as a tragic figure, Zimmermann shows not only a sad ignorance of the personality of the last Yugoslav prime minister, but also his ignorance of tragedy as an art form. According to the ancient Greeks, tragedy is a lofty form of drama in which the fate of the chief protagonist is always determined in advance. In a series of tragedies, history had cast Ante Marković in a marginal and farcical role. His “dramatic” scenario for building a “new kind of socialism” was halfway between a historic farce and a provincial comedy: while the JNA was concocting plans for a military coup and the scenario for the salvation of communism, he was planning to set up a reformist party. Of course, he had his chance to change his role into a semiheroic, semitragic one. If he had stood before the tanks setting out to destroy Vukovar and said something along the lines of “Take or kill me but let this wonderful town and its inhabitants live in peace—they have not done anything wrong!” Ante Marković would have earned the description of hero or tragic figure. There is no doubt that Aeschylus and Shakespeare would have written such a role for him before bestowing on him the aura of tragic figure or hero.

Instead, he sat on quietly in Belgrade until the last moment, when nobody, as Zimmermann himself says, even noticed his “protest” resignation. After this, he settled in Vienna, probably convinced that his project was noble and unworthy of the barbarians living southeast of that city. Thus, Ante Marković was not, and could not be, even a semihero or a semitragic figure because he was by nature an opportunist, bureaucrat, and careerist, who in his pre-Zimmermann career played the role of a communist apparatchik, and in the Zimmermann period switched to the
role of an opportunistic "democratchik." Instead of taking on the role of "divider" of Yugoslavia himself (brilliantly played by Vaclav Havel a few years later), he took on the role of "tragic" savior, thrust upon him by the U.S. administration (including Warren Zimmermann). To use Zimmermann's metaphor, we could say that this was an example of "Garbo federalism" and that, as far as responsibility was concerned, Marković himself and the administration represented by Warren Zimmermann "bore considerable responsibility for the bloodbath that followed Marković's reformism."

Instead of a strategy of gradual delegitimization of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ), which could have begun in the autumn of 1990 (or at least after Franjo Tudjman's visit to the White House; my commentary on this visit is appended to this article), the chimeras of "reformism" and "federalism" were encouraged, which enabled the JNA and Serbia to prepare for aggression undisturbed. The moment the aggression began, the U.S. administration introduced an additional means of punishing the victims by imposing an arms embargo. Warren Zimmermann's article clearly reveals how the Bush administration's policy, mediated and/or suggested by the ambassador himself, was wrong from the beginning.

Especially interesting is the honesty with which the last ambassador rationalizes what is arguably the biggest foreign policy and diplomatic mistake committed by the U.S. State Department this century: "Eagleburger and I agreed that in my introductory calls in Belgrade and the capitals of the republics, I would deliver a new message: Yugoslavia no longer enjoyed the geopolitical importance that the United States had given it during the Cold War." The Yugoslavia to which Zimmermann refers is not so much a state as a corridor, a geopolitical corridor. And this is where the error lies: even though the fall of communism and the creation of democratic and free-market institutions were the most important strategic interests of the United States and Western civilization, at the brink of a possible "democratic revolution" in the Balkans, Zimmermann openly proclaimed that this corridor no longer had any geopolitical interest for the United States. In terms of the power relations in the former Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milošević and the leadership of the JNA understood this message in only one way: You can do whatever you want!

The oft-quoted message delivered by James Baker in Belgrade on June 21, 1991, was "read" in a similar way. Warren Zimmermann views Baker's statement in a very positive light: "Listening to Baker deal with
these complex and irascible personalities, I felt that I had rarely, if ever, heard a Secretary of State make a more skillful or reasonable presentation." For us who lived in the former Yugoslavia with the awareness that the JNA was fully prepared to attack Slovenia and Croatia, James Baker’s statements that he supported the unity of Yugoslavia and that only the reformist Ante Marković had the backing of the U.S. administration were taken as a go-ahead to the JNA to attack Slovenia.

The lay psychological descriptions of other key protagonists of this tragedy, which Zimmermann offers his reader, include many lucid observations, but also some quite superficial and wrong impressions. To illustrate my meaning I will confine myself to the figure I know best, the Croatian president Franjo Tudjman. Zimmermann’s description of the Croatian president is vivid and not far from the truth: "If Milošević recalls a slick con man, Tudjman resembles an inflexible schoolteacher. He is a former general and communist, expelled from the party under Tito, and twice jailed for nationalism. Prim steel eyeglasses hang on a square face whose natural expression is a scowl. His mouth occasionally creases into a nervous chuckle or mirthless laugh."

An author interested in the facts and truth would not have accepted so easily the stereotype that Tudjman was “twice jailed for nationalism”; he would at least specify when, and what offense he had been convicted of. The Croatian president was convicted the first time because he publicized the results of his research on the number of World War II victims in Croatia (his figures were several times lower than the official statistics of the communist regime), and the second time because of an interview given to a foreign reporter. If he had specified these facts, Warren Zimmermann could have freely expressed his opinion that the research in question advocated, for instance, revisionist, nationalist, or any other values or political judgments.

To say merely that Tudjman had been “twice jailed for nationalism” is to accept the communist, totalitarian view of human rights, which banned the freedom of the press and all forms of expression guaranteed under the constitutions of democratic nations, including the First Amendment. A more ambitious writer would have taken yet another step and attempted to explain why Milošević recalled a “slick con man,” while Tudjman’s mouth “occasionally creased into a nervous chuckle or mirthless laugh.” My intention is not to argue with the view of the Croatian president as an “inflexible schoolteacher” (in fact, a comparison with a “communist or Partisan commissar” would be more to the point), “former communist,”
or "general," or even the contention that Tudjman is a politician who does not understand or love democracy and often advocates mythomaniac, ethnocentric views. I myself will add two very important traits to the list of the president's negative characteristics: obsessive narcissism and nepotism (his elder son is one of the key figures in the Croatian intelligence service, while his other son and daughter, quite lacking in business sense, have been turned into rich capitalists).

When listing the numerous faults of the president of Croatia, an objective analyst would have mentioned at least some of his virtues: (1) he is the only active antifascist combatant among all postcommunist statesmen; (2) he is one of the few professional scientists or Ph.D.'s among postcommunist leaders (he has written about a dozen books, some of which are not at all bad); (3) he was a dissident during the communist regime, a political prisoner and outcast, a citizen who (along with his family) had been deprived of almost every human right for twenty years because of his theoretical and political convictions; and (4) he is the head of a state that was, and still is, a victim of pan-Serbian aggression, the leader of a nation that has been, with the consent of "the free world," disarmed and deprived of its right to self-defense.

As regards Tudjman's alleged "obsession" with nationalism and separatism: it is obviously not his original political conviction, but a result of his unusual experience and permanent "learning by trial and error." In his long political life, the Croatian president has been a communist and an anticommmunist, an internationalist and a nationalist, an atheist and a believer, both a great admirer and an opponent of Belgrade, an elitist and a populist. During World War II, the Tudjman family was, like the majority of the Croatian people, tragically divided by ideology and party tenets. The only common family feature was antifascism. Everything else conspired to disunite the family. Tudjman's parents were members of the Croatian Farmers' Party, that is, peace-oriented, but also nationally and religiously conscious, with a more or less pronounced anticommmunist bias (however, during the war his father joined the Communist Party). The three sons of the Tudjman family joined the antifascist Partisan movement, but they were also dyed-in-the-wool communists, atheists, and idealists, passionately believing in Yugoslavia and the revolution. The president's younger brother, Stjepan, was killed fighting against the Ustashe.

After the war, Tudjman's parents met their death under mysterious circumstances at their home in their native village, as victims of circum-
stances and/or repression. Tudjman believes that they were murdered by the Yugoslav secret police because of their democratic, nationalist, and religious views, while the official police investigation established that it was classic textbook suicide (modern psychoanalysts would call it suicide committed "under the influence of post-traumatic stress syndrome"). In any case, whatever really happened to his parents, taken in conjunction with his own political persecution and imprisonment, the tragedy of his parents should play an important part in a fair and tolerant analysis of Franjo Tudjman as a person and politician.

The divisions in the Tudjman family, the divided identity (and loyalty) between “Yugoslavhood” and “Croathood” are typical for the majority of Croatian people. In general terms, one can say that the Croatian and Serbian views of “Yugoslavhood” had been fundamentally different from the very beginning, that is, since the integration of the two states. For the Croatian people, who had lived in a subordinate position in complex, multicultural unions (the Hungarian and Austro-Hungarian empires) without the right to their own (national) state and national identity, “Yugoslavhood” was a symbol of freedom, equality, and their aspirations to a state of their own (all Croatian myths are dominated by the idea of powerful Croatian states and kingdoms during the early Middle Ages). Escaping from one developed complex state (the Austro-Hungarian Empire), which was, in its name and political order, a negation of Croatian national identity and statehood, the Croats did not want just any Yugoslavia, but had a definite idea of the kind of Yugoslavia they wanted. They wanted a federal state of the southern Slavs, which would recognize the national identities and statehoods of its federal states, and which would be based on the rule of law, democracy, pluralism, multiculturalism, and federalism. Such a federal and multicultural “Yugoslavhood,” which contains some elements of American federalism, but also certain elements of the Swiss confederal model, is a home-grown Croatian intellectual and political ideal. All, or nearly all, political projects and programs as well as the mythologies and ideology of federal and democratic “Yugoslavhood” were created by Croats: Frano Supilo and Stjepan Radić created the political philosophy of southern Slav federalism (which was the reason Radić was treacherously and perfidiously assassinated in the “federal” parliament in Belgrade in 1928); Josip Juraj Strossmayer preached and practiced the ideas of southern Slav religious tolerance and ecumenism; the Croatian sculptor Ivan Meštrović transformed his “Yugoslavhood” into sculptures, statues, and mausoleums funded by the
Serbian king Aleksandar Karadjordjevic; Vladimir Dvorniković discussed the philosophical and psychological implications of the so-called character of Yugoslavhood; and Miroslav Krleža did the same work in the field of encyclopedias. Even communist “Yugoslavhood” was the work of Josip Broz Tito, a Croat. Even if this “Yugoslavhood” had many primitive and undemocratic traits, it retained some elements of (con)federalism, such as upholding the statehood of the republics that made up Yugoslavia.

While the Croatian idea of “Yugoslavhood” is based on the “right to difference,” the Serbian concept is based on a negation of differences in language, culture, religion, classes, and interests. Cross-cultural differences in the understanding of the “brotherhood and unity” tenet can be seen most clearly in the ostracism of so-called nationalism in the periods of monarchical and communist Yugoslavia. Thousands of Croats were brought to trial for singing the Croatian national anthem or certain folk songs, hoisting the Croatian flag, saying the name of the Croatian viceroy (ban) Josip Jelačić, using certain Croatian words and phrases that were labeled “nationalist,” or merely stating their Croatian national affiliation in a public place. The statistics of political criminal trials and verdicts in the period between 1970 and 1990 show that over 70 percent of the convicts were Croats.

That the symbolical expression of national identity was defined and prosecuted as a criminal offense is obvious from the structure of the new political elites: while in the new Serbian elite it is very hard to find an individual who was convicted of “counterrevolution” (that is, anticommunist views) or “nationalism,” at least 30 percent of members of the Croatian parliament served prison sentences because of an interview, a song, or a different expression of their Croatian national feelings. For instance, Vladimir Seks served one year, Vlado Gotovac five, Marko Veselica eleven, and Duro Perica thirteen years in prison for such “offenses.”

The Serbian idea and political model of “Yugoslavhood”—diametrically opposed to its Slovenian and Croatian counterparts—that the national socialist movement led by Slobodan Milošević wanted to restore and impose by force on all non-Serbs in 1986 is based on the principles of territorial expansion and the political domination of only one “chosen” nation, the Serbian nation. The right to be a “chosen nation” and dominate others is mainly based on the mythological consciousness of the greatness, heroism, and Piedmont-style sense of mission of the Serb nation, which is surrounded by allegedly upstart, genocidal, and in every way
inferior nations: Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, Macedonians, and Muslims. The Serbian idea of “Yugoslavhood” does not know or recognize any form of federalism and multiculturalism as a political value or constitutional principle.

For Serbs, who (unlike Croats and Slovenes) did not have the historical experience of living in complex state unions, “Yugoslavhood” always meant something else: the territorial expansion of Serbia, the negation of differences, the domination and negation of religious differences (that was the purpose of militant atheism) and cultural differences. In Serbian philosophy and realpolitik, federalism is not a recognized positive value. The key slogan of communist Yugoslavia, “brotherhood and unity,” expressed this concept of “Yugoslavhood,” which did not recognize very well the other two key slogans of the French Revolution: the freedom and equality of citizens and nations.

The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia after the 1980s were about the understanding of the fundamental political and constitutional principles on which the postcommunist “Yugoslavia” was to be based. While Slovenia and Croatia aimed for freedom, federalism, human rights, a multiparty system, and a market economy, the movement that simultaneously emerged in Serbia and the JNA leadership aimed for the negation of these ideas and principles. Nationalist and secessionist movements in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia were therefore not the cause, as stated by Warren Zimmermann, but the inevitable consequence of the pan-Serbian national socialist and racist movement that openly threatened to undermine all the federal and democratic institutions (which were defective anyhow), forcibly prevented the emergence of a multiparty system and private ownership, and promoted the racist negation of all ethnic and cultural differences (racist rhetoric and practice were initially directed against Albanians in Kosovo, and were gradually expanded to include all non-Serbian peoples).

The actual roots, causes, and motives of the postcommunist wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia are to be found in the Serbs, Serbia, and the JNA. The national socialist movement led by Slobodan Milošević since 1986 had not wanted to accept either a true federalization or a democratic transformation of the SFRJ. The goal of this movement was either total Serbian domination or aggression. Some of the causes and reasons for this aggression are also to be found in the JNA: all the elements of the new political movements in Croatia and Slovenia were absolutely unacceptable to the ideologically xenophobic communist army.
The demands for a multiparty system, market economy, and democratic federalism were, for the JNA, the immediate reason for a coup or war.

The causes and reasons for the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina do not, as Warren Zimmermann believes and claims, lie in nationalism per se, but in the specific forms of nationalism (or national socialism) and totalitarianism that developed, both spontaneously and on an organized basis, in the leadership of the JNA and in Serbia in the mid-1980s. Finally, by the time the multiparty system and the first intimations of secessionist movements began to emerge in Slovenia and Croatia (between 1989 and 1990), the national socialist movement in Serbia had some four of five years of destructive and racist practice (Slobodan Milošević had come to power in 1986).

By the time the new political elites and their parties came to power in Slovenia and Croatia, the national socialist movement in Serbia had already completed all its preparations for overthrowing these elites, or waging wars of aggression in these countries. By the time people in Croatia and Slovenia began to seriously ponder multiparty elections and the overthrow of Communism in the fall of 1989, the various projects for the military overthrow and aggression in Croatia and Slovenia were already completed. As Slavenka Drakulic once put it, "The war is not difficult to understand at all: There existed a Serbian political elite determined to start a war; it controlled the army; it controlled the media, and it had four years of systematic nationalist propaganda behind it. This is all it takes to start a war." 23

As a direct witness, and for a time, a participant in these events, I can state that the Croatian government was aware of the above-noted preparations for aggression on the part of the Yugoslav Federal Army and Serbia. Given that the mechanism of this aggressive and imperialistic Greater Serbian attitude could not be changed, the Croatian government tried to prevent aggression by limiting the potential of ethnic conflicts, then by proposing a "confederation" designed to peacefully transform the former Yugoslavia into a commonwealth of sovereign south Slavic states. The theoretical underpinnings of the confederation agreement were completed by August 1990 and were drafted along the lines of the European Community prior to the 1992 model, so that they retained a customs and monetary union, a confederate judiciary for human rights, and also an organization to defend the confederation, modeled after NATO. This proposal was offered for discussion and debate to all the republics of the former Yugoslavia, but for various reasons it did not obtain their support.
The proposal to peacefully transform the Yugoslav federation into a commonwealth was also submitted to representatives of the Bush administration (in mid-September 1991), but it did not receive their diplomatic support either; on the contrary, it was opposed in favor of the unity of the communist Yugoslavia and the reformist government of Ante Marković.

Last, there remains the need to answer a series of rhetorical questions as to whether the new Croatian government, through any concrete political decisions, rhetoric, symbolism, or gesture, incited the Serbian minority in Croatia to armed rebellion (which formally began in Knin on August 18, 1990).

In his memoir, Warren Zimmermann states that the new Croatian leadership and the president personally oppressed the Serbian minority: "He (Tudjman) presided over serious violations of the rights of Serbs, who made up 12 percent of the population of Croatia. They were dismissed from work, required to take loyalty oaths, and subjected to attacks on their homes and property." In this statement Warren Zimmermann repeats a stereotype that the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina are ethnic conflict and civil wars caused by minority problems in these republics or states. Paradigmatic of this type of "analysis" is an opinion piece by Roger Cohen published in the New York Times:

Many of the Serbs now living in Vukovar fled persecution elsewhere in Croatia, where Mr. Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union adopted measures in 1991 aimed largely at undermining the republic's 600,000 Serbs. Among those steps were a ban on use of the Serbs' Cyrillic script, the abrupt dismissal of many Serbs from their jobs and reintroduction of symbols formerly used by the Ustashi, or Croatian fascists, who killed thousands of Serbs when a government installed by the Nazis ruled Croatia during World War II.

The fundamental criticisms of Croatia voiced by Zimmermann, Cohen, and some others can be reduced to several "causes" of the rebellion:

1. constitutional changes, which allegedly discriminated against the Serbian minority and forbade the Cyrillic script that Serbs favored;
2. expulsion of Serbs from positions of employment and general discrimination against them;
3. use of symbolism of the Independent State of Croatia;
4. inadequate communication and political links with the Serbian minority in Croatia at the beginning of 1990.
In order to determine the legitimacy of these complaints, we will strive to make use of original texts and facts, as opposed to interpretations thereof.

We begin with the Croatian Constitution and its definition of sovereignty and statehood. The new constitution of the new Croatia, which was no longer to be considered part of a collective state of a “higher order” (communist Yugoslavia) so that it no longer could be said to have a divided sovereignty, adopted the conception of civil sovereignty according to the logic of the American Constitution. Sovereignty is decreed in the first article of the constitution:

The Republic of Croatia is a united and indivisible democratic and social state. Power in the Republic of Croatia derives from the people and belongs to the people as a community of free and equal citizens.

The people shall exercise this power through the election of representatives and through direct decision making.

The adoption in that article of the concept of a modern, civil sovereignty makes it clear that the constitution does not allow any ethnonational conceptions, be they Croat or Serb. Sovereignty at the very highest governmental level belongs to the “people” in the sense of the civil community of all citizens. In the preamble of the constitution, the first reference to the concept of nation-state uses the following definition:

The Republic of Croatia is hereby established as the national state of the Croatian nation and a state of members of other nations and minorities who are its citizens: Serbs, Muslims, Slovones, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Jews, and others, who are guaranteed equality with citizens of Croatian nationality and the realization of ethnic rights in accordance with the democratic norms of the United Nations and the free world countries.

Therefore, the Croatian Constitution can neither in its conception nor in its concrete formulation be said to “expel Serbs from the constitution,” but rather, explicitly names Serbs and other nations and minorities living in Croatia in the very definition of Croatian statehood.

With regard to the constitutional status of the Cyrillic script, it is established on two levels: (1) as an explicit constitutional right in Article 12 and (2) as a fundamental human and civil right in Article 15. Article 12 states, “The Croatian language and the Latin script shall be in official use in the Republic of Croatia. In individual local units another language and the Cyrillic or some other script may, along with the Croatian language and the Latin script, be introduced into official use under conditions specified by law.” Article 15, second paragraph, states, “Members of
all nations and minorities shall be guaranteed freedom to express their nationality, freedom to use their language and script, and cultural autonomy.” Considering Articles 12 and 15 together suggests not only that the Cyrillic script has in no way been “expelled from the constitution” but rather that its use as an official script is sanctioned at the regional level. By the very logic of the document, it would apply to all administrative units that are ethnically mixed and in which there exists a relative or absolute majority of ethnic communities that utilize the Cyrillic script, that is, Serbs.

Therefore, when we ex post facto analyze the phenomenology of the development of the ethnic conflicts in Croatia, what is surprising is not the fact that Greater Serbian propaganda falsified the content of the constitution, but the fact that the Croatian government did not provide an efficient counterargument to this propaganda.

Manipulation of the historic traumas of Serbs within Croatia—specifically, their tragic fate during the course of World War II (the Independent State of Croatia [NDH] adopted the racial legislation of Nazi Germany and practiced a policy of genocide: deportation, concentration camps, mass executions, etc.)—was furthered by way of the thesis alleging “the return of symbols of the NDH in the Croatian Constitution.” The constitution establishes the state “iconography”—the coat of arms, flag, anthem—in Article 11, which as can be plainly seen contains not a single symbol of the NDH. That is, the key symbol of the NDH, which was the letter U (the Croatian counterpart to the so-called hooked cross, or swastika, used by the Nazis), is completely absent from the constitution. On the contrary, the flag, coat of arms, and anthem “Lijepa nas” (literally, “Beautiful, our homeland”) are traditional expressions of Croatian statehood, which Croats and Serbs in Croatia displayed and sang with pride for centuries.

The final complaint, that the Croatian government did not adequately communicate with the leaders of the Serbian minority and the Serbs themselves, deserves the greatest attention. Facts point to an entire series of contacts, attempts to reach a compromise, repeated offers of choice political concessions (the president of the republic, by way of public announcements as well as private contacts, offered to place Serbs in various functions throughout the government, including the parliament and the collective presidency), the final responses to which were always negative. In the middle of 1990, representatives of the Serbian minority conclusively rejected further participation in the Croatian parliament, and
afterwards urged their nation to collective civil disobedience and ultimately, armed insurrection.

The most simple and plausible explanation of this phenomenon of mistakes in communication regarding the government, the minority leadership, and the minority itself follows the form of the above-noted thesis that the manipulation of information and the severing of such communication links were two of the key elements of Slobodan Milošević’s war strategy. Furthermore, tracking the chronology of the ethnic conflicts and the JNA’s implementation of low-intensity conflict in Croatia serves to demonstrate how the destruction of communication links and communication technology, with the intent of isolating the Serbian minority, was one of the key strategic objectives before and during the war. Air attacks on television relays, the construction of special transmitters that served as instruments of Greater Serbian and military propaganda, as well as other attempts to sever communication lines within the Zagreb-Knin-Beli-Manastir nexus, were all a part of this strategy.

The moment, in May 1991, when an army of Serbian reservists under the label of the JNA came from Serbia into Croatia for the alleged purpose of “separating the warring parties” marked the end of all communication between the Croatian government, the leadership of the Serbian minority, and the Serb minority itself. The tanks and other weaponry of the Yugoslav National Army became thereby not only an occupying force but also a communications barrier. A similar role was in some ways taken over by UNPROFOR units, which continued the status quo of Serbian occupation of the Croatian territory into 1995.

Ultimately, with regard to the sources and mechanisms by which ethnic conflicts began within Croatia, one can conclude the following: the disappearance of the Yugoslav and the appearance of the Croatian state created among Croatia’s Serbs a kind of emotional vacuum and deep frustration. The formation of a new nation-state, in this case the Republic of Croatia, inevitably involves the formation of new feeling regarding affiliation toward that new political community and loyalty to that state. The government of Slobodan Milošević, which had four years of practical experience in manipulating the masses, succeeded to a greater extent than the government of Franjo Tudjman, as far as the Serbian minority in Croatia was concerned, in projecting ideas regarding affiliation to a political community (Greater Serbia) and loyalty to a state (whether toward “Yugoslavia” or the so-called Krajina, as opposed to the Republic of Croatia).
Whether and how such a situation could and/or can be changed is a crucial question. A similar scenario unfolded in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and is likely to emerge in Macedonia in the near future.

Appendix: A Memoir of the Visit to the White House, September 25, 1990

The visit to the United States in the fall of 1990 was the first international trip by President Tudjman. This is a very important fact, because the Croatian president made a deliberate decision to establish a democratic, postcommunist Croatia modeled not on Europe, or even Germany, but the country and administration that all regard as the undisputed leader of the free world.

Prior to the trip to Washington, D.C., the Croatian administration had a clear picture of its status in the former Yugoslavia. Some factors were especially important:

1. Croatia was the only former Yugoslav republic that had been completely disarmed by the Yugoslav Federal Army (JNA). Croatia literally did not have more than a thousand automatic rifles.

2. All attempts at high-level negotiations with representatives of the Serbian minority in Croatia, aimed at seeking compromise and preventing ethnic conflict in Croatia, were broken off at the instigation of Milošević's regime.

3. The JNA had very precise plans for military intervention in Slovenia and Croatia and for ruining the democratically elected governments in these nations.

4. Croatia had, by my personal assessment, from May to September 1990, finished the project of peaceful transformation from the communist Yugoslavia into Commonwealth of Independent Nations. The draft memorandum of understanding for this commonwealth and all related documents had been written.

In my thinking, this commonwealth of former Yugoslav republics had to have a defense plan modeled after NATO. The commonwealth had to be a mini-EC (EU), with a common market and monetary and tariff union. Serbia and the JNA rejected every attempt we made to put forth this Croatian-Slovene proposal.

Because we were without weapons and felt that military intervention or war was imminent, we concluded that diplomacy and pressure from the
The text that follows is from my personal diary, which I wrote on September 25, 1990:

At exactly 4:22 P.M. we entered the West Wing of the White House. The delegation consisted of Franjo Tudjman, Hrvoje Šarinić (chief of staff), Ilija Letica (a Croatian American businessman), and myself. Prior to our entry a photographer took a picture of President Tudjman, which evoked pride and hope in him. Of course, the Yugoslav diplomats tried to thwart our success in this trip to the United States at every turn. Prime Minister Ante Marković even tried to bet with President Tudjman that he would not even be allowed to set foot on the White House lawn.

When we entered the West Wing we were unpleasantly surprised by a “translator,” Mrs. K. G., whose services had been arranged against our wishes by the U.S. State Department. Because we concluded immediately that the role of this lady was not translation (since we all spoke English), we surmised that she was an agent for Slobodan Milošević and the JNA to let them know the contents of our meeting. We therefore asked Brent Scowcroft’s secretary to not let Mrs. K. G. translate. Our request was granted.

We did not have any advance information of what would happen in the White House. We knew we would meet with General Scowcroft, but Mara Letica mentioned to me that there was a chance of meeting with George Bush. While we waited in the salon, the door opened suddenly and there entered into the room a number of bodyguards (Secret Service agents)—and George Bush. We were caught off guard. The American president gave us a warm greeting. This was to be a shaking hands meeting, arranged after pressure from Senator Bob Dole and, presumably, George J. Mitchell.

The entire diplomatic strength of the former Yugoslavia had been used to thwart the proposed meeting of Tudjman, Bush, and Scowcroft. Especially active in this campaign against the Croatian president were Budimir Lončar and Ante Marković. These saviors of the new type of socialism in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ) tried in telephone conversations with James Baker and Lawrence Eagleburger to do all they could to obstruct our visit in Washington.

On the other hand, we believed that only the American administration
had the real power to avert war, by establishing direct economic links with the new independent republics, by deligitimizing the SFRJ, and by putting pressure on Serbia and the JNA. Regarding the Tudjman-Scowcroft conversation, it lasted about forty-five minutes, and was correct by standards of protocol, but lacking in substance. That is, President Tudjman tried to explain that over 95 percent of the citizens of Croatia and Slovenia voted for political parties that had platforms representing confederalist or secessionist options, so that a commonwealth/confederation was the only peaceful option. Our host, General Scowcroft, repeated coldly that his administration supported the unity of Yugoslavia at any cost, as well as that of the Soviet Union. On the request to put pressure on Belgrade not to use force and weapons, Scowcroft answered that they supported the government of Ante Marković and the unity of Yugoslavia.

All in all, our hopes that George Bush’s administration would support the new democracies and nations (in the former Yugoslavia) were completely buried. At the same time, we were conscious of the tragic consequences of Belgrade’s preparations for war. Yet our meetings and conversations with members of Congress and the Senate indicated more tolerance toward the new democracies than the administration showed. This was especially true regarding our meetings with Senators Bob Dole and George J. Mitchell.

Bob Dole, especially, seemed extremely familiar with the technology of Serbian repression and terror in Kosovo, and had visited Croatia with a group of Congressmen. Because of his knowledge or political instinct he felt that war was imminent and was ready for the United States to do something serious to avert it. All our efforts to organize a meeting between President Tudjman and James Baker failed. Instead, a meeting with Lawrence Eagleburger was offered to our president. Because we knew that Eagleburger had material interests in the former Yugoslavia, namely, Serbia, our president wished to avoid meeting him, thinking it would not be useful. I thought differently and thought that such a meeting could be useful.

Regarding the rest of our meetings in Washington, two are worth noting: the meeting with the Anti-Defamation League and the meeting with Henry Kissinger.

The meeting with Henry Kissinger was a special wish of President Tudjman because he had heard him lecture at Harvard. The meeting was held October 1, 1990, at 4 P.M., Gina Mare, 350 Park Avenue. The gist of this meeting was that President Tudjman wanted to know Kissinger’s
thinking on the possible dissolution of the USSR and Yugoslavia, and to see whether he would agree with him on the idea of a Commonwealth. In addition, we wanted to invite Kissinger to Croatia, and to ask eventually for his expert advice. President Tudjman explained to him that Croatia had two political priorities: to create its own nationhood and to escape war. Much like Scowcroft, Kissinger did not show the slightest positive emotion or support for our ideas. He too concluded that American policy would be and should be support for democracy, free markets, federalism, and unity.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 14.
8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid., 5; my emphasis.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 8.
12. Ibid., 7.
13. Ibid., 8.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 12.
17. Ibid., 18.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 17.
20. Ibid., 2.
21. Ibid., 11.
22. Ibid., 7.
23. Los Angeles Times.