

A Decade of Dayton: Did We Really Win in Bosnia?

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, December 2005

Ten years ago last month, warriors and diplomats met in Dayton, Ohio for talks that ended the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The three-and-a-half year rampage, initiated by Serb radicals supported by Slobodan Milosevic, left 200,000 dead. As U.S. Ambassador in neighboring Austria, I was active during the war. The Dayton negotiators were smart, experienced, and best intentioned. But Bosnia's government is riddled with corruption, its most talented young people are leaving, and those remaining are frustrated by preposterously unworkable political structures. What went wrong?

The Dayton Accord assigned 49% of the original Bosnia to the Serbs and 51% to the Muslims/Croat Federation. It guaranteed refugees safe return home, required that indicted war criminals be turned over to a tribunal at The Hague and prohibited them from holding public office. For the first time, three-dimensional satellite images and digital cartography were used to determine borders for the divided state. But despite newfangled methods, systemic problems persisted.

First, a flawed paradigm led to flawed process. At Dayton, only Balkan wartime politicians were invited to the table. Engineering peace should not be left to those who engineer war. Those who kill and maim are hardly credentialed to mend a broken society.

To be fair, the American hosts would not have known whom else to invite to Dayton. During the war, US shuttle negotiators had no substantial contact with citizens inside Bosnia. Our embassy to Bosnia was skeletal, with little ability to develop relationships with community leaders. No one thought to consult the heads of 40 women's associations, who could have boosted U.S. peace objectives throughout their communities. Had they been at Dayton, they probably would have shaped a different treaty, based on the values of civil society.

Secondly, the treaty codified ethnic labels used by warmongers to stir up nationalistic sentiment and justify "ethnic cleansing." The agreement divided political positions among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, requiring people in a diverse, integrated society, to identify themselves by ethnicity or be shut out of the system. In so doing, we abetted Serb nationalists in achieving their goal of having "Republika Srpska" on Bosnian soil. We granted perpetrators of atrocities a political entity declaring itself the "Serb Republic,"

even as designers of the peace accord insisted the area would be ethnically mixed. In real terms, this meant that a Bosnian Muslim or Bosnian Croat who had been tortured in a concentration camp could return home, but into a community now called “Serb.” In effect, the perpetrators were “punished” by being allowed to keep half their plunder.

Although Milosevic’s signing of the peace accord was hailed as a diplomatic, if surreal, triumph, in reality it was Milosevic’s triumph. Even as his military operation on the ground failed, his notorious ethnic cleansing campaign prevailed at Dayton. Such were the spoils of genocide, cynics noted.

The third lesson is obvious: guarantees must be enforced. Had the Dayton treaty been fully implemented, Bosnia would have been limping, but on the road to reconciliation. Instead, the agreement didn’t provide a mechanism to deal with local authorities who ignored or protected indicted war criminals. As a result many Bosnians continue to live in fear, knowing that mass murderers, rapists, and psychopaths are still on the loose.

Even the U.S.-commanded international military force looked the other way. Shortly after the treaty was signed, an advisor to the commander shared with me his boss’s hands-off policy: “If he’s in a café and General Mladic comes in the front door, the admiral’s going out the back. It’s not our job to pick up war criminals.” To this day, Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic—the primary Serb leaders charged with genocide and crimes against humanity—remain at-large.

The general wisdom of outsiders is that Dayton was a success because it stopped the shooting. That view is disputed by Suzana Andjelic, a journalist who imbedded herself with the Serb troops, then wrote about their abuses under an assumed name. In a cutting assessment of the corruption and stonewalling perpetrated by empowered ethnic hard-liners, she says, “The truth is, Bosnians lost the war because we lost our country—and we lost it at Dayton.”

It’s time for Bosnians to regain their country with a new constitution that demands tolerance, not division. The drafters should be politicians, but also educators, journalists, business people, religious leaders, and others in civil society. That’s in the U.S. interest, since only through a model of inclusive security will we be able to look back on years of enormous investment and see success.