5 From Policy to Practice

BOSNIA AND THE WEST’S FAILURE

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent demise of communism have done very little to promote world-wide peace, let alone any semblance of stability in key areas across the globe. Winning the Cold War accomplished even less for the United States as it appears that the position it once held, that of a superpower, may be in jeopardy. As regional crises arise, the US struggles with efforts to determine not only whether or not to reply, but, specifically, in what manner, and, alone or in conjunction with others. More importantly, even determining vital US interests in the post-Cold War era appear to have assumed a vagueness not present during the days of bipolarity. From the struggle of democratization in Russia, to the debacles in Somalia and Bosnia, to strained relations with China and North Korea, the problem with policy formulation has, and remains evident for the US. Solving and/or diffusing these crises in and of itself is not the answer. The damage they have inflicted on to American leadership represents a much more fundamental problem – the inability of the US foreign policy establishment to fashion a policy for the US in the decades to come. In the short term, this failure has served to undermine US leadership and credibility in capitals around the world. US Senate majority leader Bob Dole (R-Kan) perhaps best expressed this frustration by stating:

Unfortunately, our image and position abroad is on the same downward spiral as during the Carter years, when the United States was feared by none, respected by few and ignored by many. The bottom line is that America, under the Clinton administration, is abdicating American leadership at the United Nations, at NATO and around the globe.¹

The bipartisan jab notwithstanding, this statement encapsulates the situation at hand. To fix blame upon one administration over another, however, is not the answer. It is unlikely that a second term George Bush would have fared any better. Even so, President Clinton and his foreign policy team cannot
be wholly absolved. After all, since the Second World War, US presidents have been ‘primarily foreign-policy Presidents’. It could be argued that President Clinton and his staff now have the option of either adopting a proactive approach or reactive policy formulation. In this context, Albania demonstrates, not only a chance at a US foreign policy success, but also how past and current US policy in the area vis-à-vis Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia has failed miserably. It is this failure which in turn may lead to unrest and destabilization throughout the Balkans, with larger repercussions despite a shaky peace. This latter statement does not imply that the Balkans will again become the starting point for a world-wide conflict. It is a parochial view at best and foolish notion at worst to suggest that patterns of conflict in that region that have manifested themselves in similar means will automatically produce identical results. Instead, what will be suggested is that failure by the US to formulate, adopt, implement and nurture a comprehensive foreign policy towards states such as Albania will, eventually, result in negative effects for US vital and secondary interests.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia by 1990 did not catch the West off guard, however much their pitiful response made it appear so. In the United States, President Bush sent Secretary of State James Baker to Belgrade in June 1991 in a vain attempt to keep Yugoslavia together. Baker, armed only with rhetoric, reiterated Bush’s pleas that Slovenia and Croatia would not be recognized and, moreover, that the US would continue to acknowledge the federal state. In a similar statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry echoed US sentiment, stating that it would also continue recognizing a federal Yugoslavia. The Bush administration, with the re-election year fast approaching, most likely did not want to commit the US to a policy, or worse, to action which eventually might have undermined his chances at re-election. Given America’s passive position to the revolutions of 1989, Bush perhaps thought that a similar posture should be adopted with regards to Yugoslavia. It also perhaps explains why the US was so willing to defer to the Europeans, specifically the EU, in the matter. The EU believed that their chance to demonstrate unity had come. Jacques do Poos, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister, proclaimed this was, ‘the hour of Europe.’ Perhaps he was referring, not to the EU’s role,