I. Introduction

We are all generally familiar with the role played by domestic factors in shaping foreign policy decision making in the United States, ranging from the most general and diffuse (cultural influences, historical perceptions) to the highly specific (the role of special interest groups). On the one hand, cultural and historical factors express themselves in the tension between isolationism and internationalism; on the other, narrowly focused interest groups, with Congressional support, seek to gain economic advantages abroad, and ethnic groups such as the Cuban or Armenian Americans are highly influential in shaping policy vis-à-vis their country of origin. In the case under consideration here – U.S. policy in the Balkans – we are well aware that domestic actors (we include the media in this category) put immense pressure on the Clinton administration to act more decisively in support of the Bosnian government following the outbreak of civil war in the republic in 1992, and then supported U.S. intervention in Kosovo seven years later.

Foreign policy decisions are nevertheless shaped primarily by the actions of foreign, not domestic, actors, and by the nature of the problems being addressed. For our purposes, we can distinguish between two types of policy environments. At one extreme are problems that do not need to be dealt with within a compressed time frame, such as negotiations over the environment or the liberalization of international trade. Such negotiations permit (or should permit) a careful weighing of domestic interests and foreign policy goals, aiming for compromise. Interest groups have a significant role to play in this process, all other things being equal. Such negotiations usually (but not always) elicit a low level of public interest. On the other hand – and this was the case in the Balkans – foreign policy may be made in a pressure-cooker environment, pulled and tugged by events. In the extreme case, as in Bosnia and Kosovo, foreign policy decision-making may take the form of crisis diplomacy, in which a single event (the shelling of Sarajevo, the Racak massacre) demands a quick response. Policies made in this context are highly
reactive, leave no time for longer-term strategies to emerge, and are often
colored by sensational reports in the press (the “Remember the Maine” syn­
drome). Public awareness will be high, at least among the articulate public
easily mobilized behind humanitarian concerns. Because there is pressure for
a quick response, first perceptions of the event, or crisis, are all important
(thus the heightened role of the media).

Crisis diplomacy is also characterized by a desire on the part of policy
makers to resist being swept away by the emotions of the moment. Thus,
typically, policy makers may pay lip service to pressures for intervention in a
crisis while in fact acting with caution. In the Bosnian case, Washington re­
acted with anger to the shelling of Srebrenica in April 1993, yet moved cau­
tiously and did not initiate air strikes against Bosnian Serb forces. On the
other hand, policy makers may throw caution to the winds, as happened in re­
sponse to reports of massacres of thousands of Bosnian Muslim soldiers by
Serbian forces in Srebrenica two years later. The strong response, in the latter
case, was occasioned not only by domestic pressures, but by the fact that
policy makers in Washington perceived the situation as challenging their
credibility. At the same time a contradiction existed between the perceived
interests of the United States in getting drawn into a conflict in the Balkans
(American vital interests clearly were not involved), and the pressure to in­
tervene generated by demands for humanitarian intervention.

How do domestic pressures influence foreign policy under such circum­
cstances? In the case of the former Yugoslavia, crisis diplomacy was accom­
panied by intense pressures to intervene on the part of humanitarian organi­
zations, the press, and certain ethnic lobbies. The war in Bosnia also gave rise
to a rationalization for early involvement as a response to these pressures: the
notion of preventive diplomacy. Domestic influences on foreign policy thus
took two forms: calls for intervention; and efforts on the part of the policy
makers to anticipate these pressures and if possible to prevent a humanitarian
crisis from emerging in the first place (preventive diplomacy). We shall ex­
amine the problem of how policies were shaped to anticipate crises in Part II
of this paper. But first we must examine the situation that prevailed at the
outset of the Balkan crisis and how it encouraged domestic forces in the
United States to place pressure on Washington to become involved in the
Balkan wars.

II. The Role of Domestic Forces in Shaping American
Policy in the Balkans

We may begin by noting the absence of any overriding American interest in
the Balkans after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the Cold War,