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The Case Against Western Intervention in the Balkans Is Clear

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — When the French offered to send 1,100 troops to Sarajevo, an eminent German defense official said off the record: "Great! And who is going to supply the other 89,900 men?"

As the Serbs continue hammering at the Bosnians, there is no shortage of moral outrage and strategic advice.

Television continues to dredge up images supposedly banished forever from the mind. Former leaders no

righteousness is never enough to move nations to shed their own blood on behalf of others.

Yes, I am obliged to stop the mugger, but only at an acceptable risk to my own life and limb. Statesmen's moral choice is tougher still. When they ask their young to die, there must be a compelling interest. This is why the West went to war against the

minivans, but all they needed was a bridge overhead to fool America's eyes in the sky.

Now add mountains and forests, and artillery pieces moved in minutes and mortars carried in knapsacks. Then try your luck with satellites and pinpoint strikes.

Think not about Iraq but about Lebanon — and how a few battalions could secure a "corridor" to Sarajevo. Now the good guys would be the sitting ducks. And even if they did get through, food to the beleaguered will not stop the Serbian land grab.

For success, a cheap solution will not do. The "ethnic cleansing" is masterminded and the munitions supplied from Belgrade. A "Baghdad strategy" is needed.

Western forces — hundreds of planes — would have to demolish refineries and power plants, destroy railroads, truck convoys, ports and airports. The air force would have to be pinned down while hardened ammunition dumps and command bunkers were cracked.

The risk of diplomatic conflict would have to be coolly faced by telling Hungary, Greece and Romania to stop the smuggling of supplies — or no more help and good will.

Think not about the false analogy of Hitler's 20-odd divisions that could not "pacify" Yugoslavia but about the Chetnik leader Draza Mihailovic, who took to Bosnia's hills in 1945 with 50,000 men and, though isolated and exhausted, defied battle-hardened Tito for more than a year.

The point is that firepower, no matter how huge, cannot rearrange ethnic jigsaw puzzles.

If we go in, how and when do we get out? And if we go in to teach the murderous Serbs a lesson, are we prepared for repeat performances in the civil wars of the ex-Soviet Union?

This is why those "other 89,900 men" will not be found. To will the

moral end, one must will large-scale means. But these require a compelling interest and a decent chance of success. That is the blood-drenched message of politics among nations.

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longer in the business of making real choices urge quick strikes from the air. Pundits advise us to drive a corridor to Sarajevo and to blow up artillery positions in the hills.

But how do we get those "other 89,900 men"?

This is not a debate between the callous and cowardly on the one side and bleeding heart moralists on the other. If it were, we would not see right and left, idealists and realists on both sides in this curious free-for-all.

It is not a debate about morality. It is about means, interests and success — and that is where outrage meets its match.

Those timid Security Council resolutions, those endless colloquies among the Western powers — what do they tell us? They tell us that

"Butcher of Baghdad" — yes, to safeguard the oil, to secure a strategic region and to blunt his long-range weapons of mass destruction.

Needless to say, we did not stop the millionfold slaughter in Cambodia, where such interests were absent. In addition to interest, there must be a decent chance of success. To go after a thug, one must be able to defeat him. Saddam Hussein's conscripts were sitting ducks against the best armies in the world equipped with "star wars" weapons.

But the Serbs? In the Balkans almost everything is stacked against the West.

Remember how many planes the United States sent against Iraqi Scud launchers — and how many Scuds hit Israel nonetheless? These were no