

# Bosnia: From farce to tragedy?

**A**ccording to the pop version of chaos theory, the stroke of a butterfly wing in Peoria could unleash a typhoon in the Pacific. Bosnia looks like a perfect illustration. Eighty years ago, a simple murder in Sarajevo set off a cosmic chain of events culminating in World War I. Today, a small war among the tribes of the former Yugoslavia could yet trigger a similar tragedy.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization already looks like a prime victim: NATO survived 40 years of cold war, finally besting the Soviet Union. Yet in Bosnia, its historical triumph has turned to ashes. Not only was NATO unable to contain, let alone stop, the war; suddenly, its very existence hangs in the balance.

Instead of enforcing peace, the alliance has begun warring against itself. British diplomats mutter that the United States is about to murder NATO. The French, always happy to score a point, accuse the Americans of betrayal in Bosnia. In a move dripping with symbolism, America's two oldest allies came together in Chartres, where 500 years ago France and Britain laid to rest their Hundred Years' War. Their purpose: to combine forces against U.S. policy in Bosnia and establish a joint air-force command for peacekeeping.

What U.S. policy? One stroke of the butterfly wing was the White House decision to stop enforcing the arms embargo against Bosnia. A "stab in the back," screamed some Europeans. But in fact, the pullout, mandated by Congress, changes very little. The Europeans continue to patrol the Adriatic with little U.S. naval presence, and the Muslims keep getting plenty of arms. The histrionics, meantime, may yet turn this farce into a tragedy unless Washington, London and Paris can make up at the NATO ministerial meeting this week.

**Lofty principles.** How? First, all three have to cut back on hypocrisy and self-righteousness. The Clinton administration, egged on by Congress, wants to lift the arms embargo in favor of the Bosnians, invoking the lofty principle that we must help the victims to help themselves. The British and the French are dead set against arms deliveries, claiming that these will widen the war, destroy negotiations and subject their U.N. peacekeeping troops to murderous crossfire. That, too, looks like a reasonable principle.

But look again. The flaw in the U.S. position is simple: America wants to call the shots while it refuses to put its own troops on the line. The Europeans protest that arming the Bosnians is an irresponsible feel-good policy, mislead-

ing the Muslims with illusions of victory and exposing them to the full fury of the Serbs. And when the Muslims are slaughtered, the U.S. cavalry will not come to their rescue.

The Anglo-French position is hardly less flawed. Their troops don't keep the peace because there is none; the "peace plan" proposed by the so-called Contact Group (America, France, Britain, Germany, Russia) was contemptuously rejected by the Serbs.

Worse, by pretending strict neutrality in the war, the British and the French inevitably favor the stronger side, the Serbs, who are back on the offensive. And the Anglo-

French troops do not protect the victim; perversely, their main mission has come down to protecting themselves. But what good is a police force that hunkers down when the bullets fly?

Can we do better and save NATO in the process? There are not too many options in a "war of conscience" when the absence of compelling national interests translates into the unwillingness to sacrifice blood and treasure for many years to come.

But diplomacy alone will not chasten the Serbs. Hence, NATO has only one card to play: air power. So far, the alliance has played that card with the decisiveness of a sleepwalker—a few bombs here, a handful of missiles there. Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serbs' leader, was naturally not impressed. What is he to make of those 40-odd NATO planes that last week bombed a Serbian runway without taking out the 15 Serbian jets sitting nearby?

It is true that planes don't win wars. But as the experience of Operation Desert Storm shows, a sustained air attack can certainly stop

the other side from winning. If the British and the French want a negotiated peace, they will have to add punch to the persuasion. If they want to dissuade the Clinton administration from lifting the arms embargo, they will have to make sure that the Muslims don't need the additional weapons.

NATO air power used in earnest can serve both purposes. It can sober up the Serbs and help Bill Clinton sober up the new Congress. Congressional grandstanding in the form of unilateral muscle flexing does not make for good diplomacy, not in the place that gave us World War I. Above all, Bosnia is not worth the premature demise of NATO. There is no security in Europe without the United States. Who should know this better than the British and the French as they look back—at 1914, at 1939 and at 1947, the beginning of the cold war? ■



*The French worry about the security of their peacekeepers.*