

OUTLOOK

A triple peace ushers in the New Year

The ghosts of New Years past used to look pretty grim: war and famine, chaos and disaster. Hence, we should count our blessings as we peer into the face of 1996. Sure, lots of bad things could still happen at home. But look abroad. When did the world seem so cheerful as on New Year's Day in 1996?

Call it the triple peace: Bosnia, Middle East, Northern Ireland. Late in 1995, the Bosnian bloodshed came to an end at an air base in Ohio. In September, amid Palestinian terror in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Israel and the PLO signed a 600-page agreement that is being followed to the letter. Reconciliation in

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Northern Ireland got a nice boost when Bill Clinton came for a visit in November.

The triple peace has a single source: exhaustion or, more precisely, the sense that war no longer works. For three years, the Serbs were on a roll, "cleansing" town after town while humiliating NATO, the European Union and the United Nations. But suddenly their free ride turned into a nightmare. When the Serbs went one "safe haven" too far, NATO joined the fray in earnest, delivering by cruise missile an irresistible message: "You shall not prevail."

It took the Arabs 50 years to absorb the same lesson. Victorious throughout, Israel taught them that war was no option. But the best Army in the world also learned a harrowing lesson during the intifada: You can't fight women and children; the prize isn't worth the price. Israelis and Palestinians have embarked on the grand experiment of peace because neither could crush the other. And so it was in Northern Ireland, where the IRA and the British Army could achieve only a bloody stalemate.

Is exhaustion the only measure as we weigh the prospects of peace in '96? Look again. In each case, fate was escorted — nay, coaxed — by the "last remaining superpower," the United States. In Ulster, Clinton came in quite handy when the peace process went into deep freeze over the issue of disarming the IRA. For two parties immobilized by fear and distrust, it is often easier to yield to a third — and much bigger one — than to each other. In the Middle East, the United States reassured Israelis and Palestinians while budging the Syrians toward accommodation that might yet blossom into peace in 1996. The most dramatic payoff came in Bosnia. Where the European Union and the U.N. had failed so shamefully, a blend of Holbrookism and sheer firepower turned the trick. Without the United States, NATO would not have bombed — and the Serbs would still be busy with "ethnic cleansing."

Nor is this the end of the story. As Americans ponder their course in '96, they might recall that peace never stands on its own. Unless somebody stronger than all shoulders the burden, peace will buckle. Could a third-tier French official have pulled off a Dayton in Dijon? *Jamais*, never. Can the British foreign secretary get the Syrians to sign with Israel? Not a chance. Unless America stays in the peace business, troops and all, the miracles of '95 might turn into the monsters of '96. □ BY JOSEF JOFFE

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