

Clinton's speech in Slovenia: an abysmal display of ignorance

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In considering US policy in the Balkans, it is at times difficult to determine the dividing line between great power scheming, deliberate falsification and sheer ignorance. A case in point is Clinton's speech Monday in the Slovenian capital of Ljubljana.

Clinton sought to hold up Slovenia, the most economically developed of the former Yugoslav republics, as a model of prosperity and democracy, while enjoining the Serb population to overthrow Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. In the course of his address Clinton provided a version of recent Balkan history that stands in obvious contradiction to the facts, and revealed an astonishing ignorance of Slovenian society.

Hailing Slovenian President Milan Kucan, until the beginning of the decade the leader of the Slovene League of Communists, Clinton declared: "Eight years ago, Mr. Milosevic triggered a military assault on your nation. But you resisted. You secured your freedom. And you proclaimed it will never be the same again." Slovenia had shown, Clinton said, that it was possible to reject "the murderous rule" of Milosevic.

Slovenia's "war of independence" was, in fact, a far cry from the heroic struggle suggested by Clinton. Nor was it "triggered" by Milosevic. The reality is that on June 25, 1991 Kucan, backed by Germany, Austria, Hungary, Denmark and the Vatican, declared Slovenia's secession from the Yugoslav federation. The federal government in Belgrade responded by mobilizing Yugoslav troops already stationed in Slovenia (a perfectly legal and normal situation given Slovenia's status as an integral part of Yugoslavia) to the border with Italy and Austria, and declared it would resist the unilateral secession of the republic. The president of Yugoslavia at the time, Clinton's speech notwithstanding, was Ante Markovic, not Milosevic

(who was then president of the Republic of Serbia).

In light of the support of the Europeans for Slovenian independence and the lack of a numerically significant population of Serbs, or any other ethnic minority, in Slovenia, Markovic quickly decided to accept the republic's secession. After 10 days, and a total of 64 deaths on both sides, he called off the war.

Clinton's depiction of the Slovene leadership as champions of democracy is similarly at odds with the historical record. There was nothing progressive or democratic about the nationalist policies of the Kucan clique. They were, on the contrary, thoroughly opportunistic and selfish.

The leadership in Ljubljana sought to exploit the privileged position which Slovenia enjoyed, as compared to the other republics within the Yugoslav federation. Slovenia had benefited from its geographical proximity to Austria and a steady influx of Western funds. The demand for secession was not motivated by broad democratic conceptions, but rather narrow financial calculations. Kucan adopted the program of Slovenian separatism because he concluded his constituency of ex-Stalinist bureaucrats, professionals and aspiring capitalists could do better on their own than if they remained within the federation. As part of Yugoslavia they felt hampered in their drive to privatize industry and finance and open their markets to foreign transnationals. Moreover, they resented having to contribute a portion of their wealth to assist the poorer republics in the federation.

As for the "democratic" birthright of the new nation, author Susan Woodward depicts the repressive methods that were employed by Kucan in her book *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War* (Brookings Institution, 1995):

"At the end of November 1989 the Slovene

government asserted full constitutional sovereignty over its borders by forbidding the right to assemble, on threat of military force, to an association representing Serbs and Montenegrins from Kosovo who sought to hold a 'meeting of truth' in Ljubljana on December 1 of about 40,000 people to inform Slovenes about events in Kosovo" (p. 115).

Kucan and his Croatian nationalist counterpart Franjo Tudjman were the prime movers in the escalating conflict with the central government in Belgrade. With the support of the Germans, Austrians, etc., they sought to identify democratization with secession, while preempting plans by the regime in Belgrade to submit the question of republican independence or Yugoslav unity to a national referendum.

Quoting Woodward: "Slovenia had insisted successfully that republican elections occur first, and it continued to veto any countrywide expression of preferences, from a proposed federal referendum on the constitutional amendments at the end of 1988 to a referendum on the fate of the country scheduled in 1990. The first democratic elections were thus not the opening of choice for Yugoslavs but its closure....

"In fact, there never was an all-Yugoslav vote. Yugoslavs found their individual citizenship reduced to that of their republic, and were given no choice in the matter" (Woodward, pp. 118 and 132).

In neither Slovenia nor Croatia did the parties that spearheaded the drive for secession receive a majority of votes in the republican elections of 1990. Nevertheless Kucan and Tudjman, who emerged as the head of nationalist coalitions, claimed the election results to be a mandate for separation.

As for the substance of Slovenian independence, the new state's utter dependency on its Western sponsors is indicated by the fact that in October of 1990 a new Slovene currency was being printed secretly in Austria.

Clinton's enthusiasm for the Kucan regime was not shared initially by the Bush administration, which at first opposed a unilateral declaration of independence. Within Europe itself there was considerable opposition, especially on the part of France, to Germany's demand that the Council of Europe recognize Slovenian and Croatian nationhood. It was widely recognized that a unilateral declaration of independence would lead to civil war in the Balkans.

On June 21, 1991 then-Secretary of State James

Baker met with the leaders of the six Yugoslav republics and secured assurances from Kucan and Tudjman that they would not act unilaterally. Four days later the Slovenian and Croatian leaders reneged on their pledges.

Perhaps even more remarkable than Clinton's apparent ignorance of this history is his lack of knowledge of Slovenian society. In his speech on Monday he praised the country as a model of multi-ethnic harmony. Serbia, he declared, must "choose the path that Slovenia has chosen, where people reach across the old divides and find strength in their differences and their common humanity."

Unfortunately for Clinton, the reality of Slovenia does not accord with his mantra of ethnic reconciliation, effected through the medium of NATO bombs and troops. The country of 2 million people is notable for its ethnic and religious homogeneity. It is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, has its own language and only a small minority of Serbs, some 2 percent of the population.

Ironically, it is precisely Slovenia's ethnic homogeneity that makes it a prime example of US policy in the Balkans. If one considers the results of American and European intervention in the former Yugoslavia over the past decade, it becomes clear that the basic thrust has been the dissolution of a multinational state and the creation of "ethnically pure" mini-states and cantons.



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