The Clinton Years: Assessing Success in the Bosnian Genocide Intervention

Natalie Pierce
Pepperdine University

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By Natalie Pierce

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to argue that President Bill Clinton’s intervention in the Bosnian genocide was successful. In order to define success, the author compiles a list of Clinton’s explicitly stated goals for the region. The author explores Clinton’s campaign promises on Bosnia, which he expressed in public statements and the first presidential debate against the current President, George H.W. Bush, and demonstrates how the Bosnian initiatives were slightly altered after Clinton took office. The author uses a variety of sources including newspaper articles, speech and debate transcripts, and secondary sources to construct Clinton’s concrete objections. Through a chronological assessment of United States involvement in Bosnia, the author contends how each one of Clinton’s goals was achieved. The paper also includes how other important players, like Senator Bob Dole and the United Nations, contributed to a more peaceful Bosnia.

Introduction

When asked to assess the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton, the typical American will easily recall his scandalous affair and impeachment. However, Bill Clinton accomplished much more than that in his presidency: in particular, he successfully appropriated the United States’ abundant resources to help combat genocide in Bosnia. During his campaign in 1992, Governor Clinton criticized President Bush for America’s lack of involvement in the Balkans, arguing that the United States should support an airstrike against the Serbs and fight for the lifting of the arms embargo in order to stop the ethnic cleansing of Muslims and Croats. Today, scholars have a wide range of opinions on Clinton’s actions concerning the former Yugoslavia. Some historians focus on the humanitarian aspects of the Bosnian genocide and argue that Clinton should have acted sooner. Others claim that the president’s actions were unconstitutional and imperialistic. There are scholars that fall in the middle of the spectrum, who claim that
U.S. involvement in Bosnia had its successes and its failures. All in all, Clinton’s success in Bosnia has been widely disputed. However, by comparing Clinton’s initial objectives for Bosnia - to offer humanitarian aid, defend the no-fly zone, and co-author a forceful peace treaty alongside NATO - with his accomplishments, such as supporting UN safe havens, engaging in airstrikes against no-fly zone violators, and creating and signing the Dayton Accords, we can see that Clinton was successful on his own terms.

**State of the Question**

Samantha Power is a well-known humanitarian advocate. Her book “*A Problem from Hell*” *America and the Age of Genocide* was a *New York Times* Bestseller and won her the Pulitzer Price. The book is a history of genocide and contains chapters on all of the recent acts of genocide. Power cites numerous sources, and her research is thorough. She dedicates three chapters to “Bosnia,” “Srebrenica,” and “Kosovo.” She recognizes that there was more international involvement in ending the Bosnian genocide compared to other acts of genocide by contending that “The international community did not do nothing during the vicious war.”\(^1\) However, Power believes that there was “much the United States might have done.”\(^2\) She does not view Clinton as a proactive force in ending the Bosnian genocide. Power discusses how Clinton’s administration “abandoned its proposal to lift the arms embargo,”\(^3\) and watched the war “helplessly.”\(^4\) Although Power concedes that intervention in Bosnia did bring the end of ethnic cleansing in that region, she argues that Clinton should not receive credit for the success because he was not completely committed to ending the genocide.

On the other side of the spectrum, Banks and Straussman argue that Clinton was steadfast in his desire to control the situation in Bosnia, and he was not going to let Congress hold him back. The authors, in their article “A New Imperial Presidency? Insight from U.S. Involvement in Bosnia,” conclude that Clinton’s action to send U.S. soldiers into Bosnia posed a threat to those soldiers. Banks and Straussman believe that this was an “unconstitutional usurpation of congressional power over war.”\(^5\) I agree with the authors that Clinton was willing to fight Congress in order to be able to intervene in Bosnia,
however I think they go too far in claiming that Clinton’s actions were a misuse of power.

Barry Blechman and Tamara Wittes look at the U.S. foreign policy under Bush Sr. and Clinton in their article “Defining Moment: the Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy.” Ultimately, in their assessment of Bosnia, the authors conclude that the American threats to the Serbs “appear to have been successful in persuading the Serbs to stop fighting and start talking.” Although the authors note that if there had been a “willingness to deploy U.S. ground troops and utilize European forces already on the ground” sooner, casualties in Bosnia could have been significantly reduced.

Finally, David Rothkopf, a clear supporter of Clinton’s actions in Bosnia, praises him in the book *The Price of Peace: Emergency Economic Intervention and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Rothkopf argues that Clinton was hindered by lack of domestic support for genocide intervention, as well as the European allies’ refusal to be more proactive against the genocide. Rothkopf writes, “It is my strong feeling...that we should not compound past errors of appeasement from previous administrations and from our allies in Europe with continuing weakness today.” Rothkopf also believes that peace could not have been obtained without military intervention.

While researching the United States Bosnian intervention, I found many sources condoning or criticizing Clinton’s actions. However, they looked broadly at his influence over foreign policy, and none specifically show whether he achieved his stated goals. Certainly, Clinton had expansive influence during his eight years in office, but he was just one man. My point-of-view on the matter does not fall within the spectrum of whether or not Clinton’s actions were constitutional, necessary, or timely. Like Rothkopf, I will not be criticizing Clinton’s actions pertaining to Bosnia. Instead I will look at the evolution of Clinton’s Bosnian objectives, why it took the U.S. longer than expected to intervene against the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and how Clinton still managed to accomplish his foreign policy goals there.

**The Balkans**
The situation in the Balkans was especially volatile as the Cold War came to a close. The area known as Yugoslavia was composed of six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and Macedonia. It was also home to three distinct ethnic/religious groups that were intermixed among the six republics: Roman Catholic Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and Orthodox Serbs. In 1991, the Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, pushed for Serbian dominance throughout Yugoslavia. In order to avoid Milosevic’s influence, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia seceded from Yugoslavia. Bosnia, out of all the Yugoslav nations, had the most widespread composition of ethnicities with, 43% Muslim, 35% Serb, and 18% Croat. In order to prevent violence and preserve this multi-ethnic melting pot, the United Nations imposed an arms embargo on Bosnia and Croatia in 1991. The embargo completely restricted the delivery of weapons to those areas. Although the Serbs were in the minority, they had a very strong allegiance to Milosevic, and Milosevic provided them with additional forces and artillery. In this way, the Serbs were able to bypass the arms embargo and easily overtake the Muslims and Croats who were left defenseless under the embargo.

The ethnic cleansing began shortly after Bosnia pronounced its independence. Within weeks, the Serbs rounded up influential Muslim and Croatian “intellectuals, musicians, and professionals” and had them executed. Soon, restrictions were put on all non-Serbs that forbade them from moving without permission, gathering in groups of more than three, riding or driving in cars, and communicating through a medium other than a post office phone. Next, Serbian forces entered Muslim/Croat neighborhoods and forcibly removed them from their homes with little or no warning. By May 1992, the international community had evidence that the Serbs had created concentration camps. As journalistic reports of men being worked to death and women being raped in the camps surfaced, some saw immediate ties to the Holocaust and argued for humanitarian intervention. In the United States, President Bush’s rival, Bill Clinton, the Democratic governor of Arkansas, saw the situation in Bosnia not only as a cry for help, but a foreign policy weakness to expose.

The Clinton Campaign
Although Clinton had already denounced Bush’s domestic policy with such taglines as “It’s the economy, stupid,” the information coming from Bosnia provided a foreign policy platform for Clinton to attack Bush. On July 26, 1992, Clinton issued a statement in response to reports from Bosnian prison camps. Clinton chastised Bush’s lack of authority saying that “the United States should take the lead in seeking UN Security Council authorization for airstrikes against those who are attacking the relief effort.” Clinton’s stance on Bosnia angered those who backed Bush’s foreign policy, and they immediately retorted that Clinton was rash and “reckless” in his claims, and he did not know enough on the matter to make a valid assessment. In support of President Bush, Secretary of Defense, Dick Cheney, countered Clinton’s criticism saying, “We are prepared to use U.S. naval and air assets to support the international humanitarian relief effort in Bosnia.” However, at this time, many “prominent Republicans and conservatives” believed Clinton made the stronger argument.

On August 10th, 1992, the New York Times recognized Clinton for his “aggressive stance” on U.S. intervention in Bosnia. The article specifically cited Clinton’s beliefs that “the United States should consider using military force to open Serbian detention camps and should lift the arms embargo on the former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia and Croatia.” Clinton said: “I think the Administration believes that with a show of resolve on the humanitarian aid issue they will be able to…bring to an end, detention camps through diplomatic pressure.” He argued that threats were not enough to halt the ethnic cleansing and that force should be implemented. President Bush chose not to comment on the use of force, but he did make clear that he disagreed with the dropping of the arms embargo, believing that it would only bring more violence. There were some that agreed with Clinton’s vision, though. At this time, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was looking at the lifting of the embargo as part of a solution for the Balkans. Although newspaper articles proclaimed Clinton’s wish to provide more aid to the Bosnians, the presidential candidate was careful not to be portrayed as an international insurrectionist. In the article, Clinton was quoted saying he would completely support the wishes of the European NATO allies such as Britain and France, indicating his role as a team player.
The first presidential debate took place on October 11, 1992 and included Clinton’s contenders President Bush and the Independent candidate, Ross Perot. Clinton was cautious in his commitment to Bosnia. During the debate, Bush was asked how he could read about the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and not immediately commit American troops to end the suffering. Perot and Clinton were each given a chance to respond. In his one-minute time allotment, Clinton directly said: “I agree that we cannot commit ground forces to become involved in the quagmire of Bosnia.” He applauded the establishment of the no-fly zone over Bosnia, which had been instituted the month before. Essentially, the no-fly zone was monitored by NATO. They specified which aircrafts could pass over the region, and the no-fly zone was created to protect UN humanitarian aid to refugees who had been removed from their homes by Serbian forces. Clinton continued to support the lifting of the arms embargo, as well as, cooperation with the allies: “The U.S. should try to work with its allies to stop [the ethnic cleansing].” The first presidential debate was the only debate to mention Bosnia.

In summary, during his campaign, Clinton maintained that the U.S. should work with its European allies in all endeavors aimed at bringing peace to Bosnia. Clinton supported the use of air attacks against those hindering relief efforts. He also repeatedly denounced the arms embargo. However, especially in the first presidential debate, Clinton made it clear that he did not have the immediate intention of committing U.S. ground troops to Bosnia.

The First Hundred Days

On November 4, 1992 Bill Clinton was elected the 42nd president of the United States. On November 15th, the New York Times ran an article that speculated how Clinton would hold up to his campaign promises. The article stated that Clinton promised “to adopt a more aggressive posture toward humanitarian relief for Bosnia, even if it requires American military intervention as part of a United Nations operation.” The author was skeptical that Clinton would reach the level of intervention he wanted especially because
the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, “vigorously opposed such intervention.”

The Clinton Administration wasted no time exploring the options for Bosnia. In late January 1993, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency gathered information regarding possible solutions for Bosnia to present to President Clinton. Despite Clinton’s quick response to dealing with the Bosnian problem, some worried that he would be impeded by the United States’ allies in the UN, Britain, France, and Russia, none of whom seemed to want to become involved in the area. Among the foreign policy options to consider were: (1) the authorization of air power to enforce the no-fly zone, (2) the commitment of U.S. troops to UN peacekeeping missions, (3) the establishment of a body to investigate ethnic cleansing, and (4) one of Clinton’s resounding campaign claims: dismissing the arms embargo.

After hearing all of the viable options, Clinton decided to make sure all political decisions with the allies and the former Yugoslav nations were unanimous. He was willing to commit U.S. troops to protect a peace agreement and planned on continuing to threaten Milosevic with force. These goals were slightly different compared to Clinton’s “reckless” campaign promises.

Once in office, Clinton felt pressure from many sources to curtail his plans for intervention in Bosnia. Domestically, Clinton was fighting the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell (who believed even the creation of a no-fly zone was too much intervention), his foreign policy advisors who vehemently advocated supporting any decisions made by the UN and NATO, and the American public, many of whom were confused by the situation in Bosnia and did not believe the U.S. should intervene. Meanwhile Clinton’s foreign allies could not come to a unified decision on how to resolve the conflict in the Balkans.

The traditional “first hundred days” assessment of President Clinton saw a mix of his triumphs and his struggles. Interestingly, the New York Times appraisal of Clinton
mentioned nothing about the decisions regarding Bosnia, indicative of the public’s lack of concern. USA Today simply said: “Clinton has struggled to find an effective way to end the carnage in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”32 Similarly, the Washington Post saw Clinton’s position on Bosnia as a stalemate.

Ultimately, Clinton’s stated goals for Bosnia were to: (1) support humanitarian aid; (2) enforce the no-fly zone; (3) negotiate with European allies to find a “political solution” for the region; and (4) establish a peace treaty that would be implemented with the help of U.S. ground troops.33 Later, in his autobiography My Life, Clinton would perform his own first hundred days assessment and wrote concerning Bosnia: “We were still a long way from a solution.”34 Still, with two terms of presidency, a solution was eventually achieved.

**Clinton: 1993-2000**

As Clinton and his advisors continued to assess the situation in Bosnia, things in Europe began to deteriorate even further. Initially, in 1992, the Serbs carried out ethnic cleansing against both the Muslims and the Croats. By early 1993, the Muslims and Croats had found ways to get around the arms embargo. So, in mid-1993, the Muslims and Croats began fighting amongst themselves, creating a smokescreen of civil war that covered up the continued violence of the Serbs.35 So as the Bosnian Serbs attacked the capital of Bosnia, Sarajevo, in 1993-1994, the Croats simultaneously shelled the predominantly Muslim city of Mostar in Bosnia.36

These outlandish exhibitions of violence finally convinced the United Nations to take action. In April 1993, six UN peacekeeping safe havens were set up in the Bosnia cities of Srebrenica, Gorazde, Sarajevo, Tulza, Zepa, and Bihac. These save havens provided humanitarian aid, thus satisfying the first of Clinton’s stated goals. In June of that same year, Serbian forces refused to recognize the safe havens and attacked them. In response, the U.S., along with other European nations, resolved to commit 300 troops to the peacekeeping missions.37 Still dealing with domestic resistance to intervention, Clinton specified that the troops were not there to engage in combat but were simply there to
protect the safe havens. The commitment of U.S. troops was a triumph for Clinton because it went further than the goals he agreed to in January: the troops were not going to defend a peace agreement but to defend a group of people. Thus, as the international community recognized the dire situation in Bosnia, Clinton was able to further justify the allocation of American resources toward peace in the Balkans. At the same time, the U.S. also decided to join France, Britain, the Netherlands, and Turkey in the donation of aircrafts to NATO that would be used in airstrikes to protect the UN safe havens. The airstrikes, many argued, were necessary to protect the no-fly zone, Clinton’s second stated goal.

The need for NATO airstrikes would not be seriously considered until 1995. On July 11th, Bosnian Serb militia entered the UN safe haven of Srebrenica, overtook the 600 Dutch peacekeepers stationed there, and murdered approximately 7,000 Muslims. Just two weeks later, the safe haven Zepa fell to Serbian forces. Although there had been smaller attacks on the safe havens, the attacks on Srebrenica and Zepa blatantly defied international peace establishments. At this point, pressure on Clinton to be decisive about Bosnia was greater than it had ever been. Interestingly, a month before the attack on Srebrenica, the President had expressed his discontent with his senior advisors over the lack of a resolute plan for Bosnia. This lack of leadership within the international community would directly contribute towards the delayed response to the fall of the safe havens.

In the meantime, Republican Bob Dole saw the passage of an important bill through the Senate. On July 26, 1995, Republicans and Democrats voted to refrain from enforcing the arms embargo on Bosnia. Although this had been one of Clinton’s goals since his candidacy, over the years it had been neglected because Muslims and Croats were able to obtain their own weapons and fighting between the two groups became widespread. Clinton cannot take sole credit for accomplishing this goal, but the passage of the bill importantly showed that Congress was willing to vote on foreign policy matters that supported Bosnia. Previously, Congress had emphatically protested against intervention
in Bosnia. This act displayed a turning point in Congressional policy regarding Bosnia from isolationism towards intervention.

More than a month after the fall of both the Srebrenica and Zepa safe havens, NATO, with U.S. support, finally took action against the Serbs. For three weeks, beginning in the end of August, NATO engaged in 750 strikes against Serbian ammunition bunkers and communication centers.43 The bombings were largely criticized because their implementation took longer than many deemed necessary. Still, despite the reluctance, which was mainly caused by the lengthy planning process, this defensive action was a victory for President Clinton because it upheld his resolution to support airstrikes. The strikes led directly to the achievement of his other two objectives: organize international negotiations to bring peace and create a political solution to the region.

The airstrikes caused widespread damage to Serbian strongholds and substantially influenced reconciliation efforts. In November 1995, the Serbian President Milosevic, along with the Bosnian and Croatian presidents met with the leaders of NATO at a United States Air Force base near Dayton, Ohio. As a result of their negotiations, all parties signed a peace treaty known as “The Dayton Accords.” Although much of the talks had taken place in Ohio, the treaty was formally signed in Paris on December 14, 1995. Terms of The Dayton Accords included: partitioning the land among the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, establishing an Implementation Force (IFOR) of military ground troops, protecting the rights of refugees to return home, upholding the ceasefire, and investigating the human rights violations involving ethnic cleansing.44

As part of the agreement, the U.S. would send 20,000 troops to participate in IFOR. The treaty allocated that IFOR would be present in Bosnia for one year only. The designation of troops to Bosnia violated Clinton’s position in the first presidential debate, but it did support his fourth initial agreement as president: that he would commit troops to protect a peace agreement. The international community applauded Clinton’s support of NATO and IFOR: “Within a few years after Dayton, Clinton’s vision of a Europe that is undivided, peaceful, and democratic was well on the way to becoming a reality.”45
Though his actions may have come sooner or later than some wanted, Clinton was now holding the U.S. accountable for Bosnia’s harmonious future.

A year came and went and Clinton believed that the presence of military force was still necessary in Bosnia. In December 1997, Clinton said that he was unsure how long their presence would be needed there, but he hoped to bring some of the 8,500 troops currently in Bosnia home.46

Clinton was right to assume that further unrest might come upon the area. After successfully enforcing the ceasefire for two years and holding elections in Bosnia, the world realized that Milosevic could not be contained.47 Guerilla warfare between Milosevic’s army and rebel fighters in Kosovo (an area in the former Yugoslavia, south of Serbia) caused NATO to intervene in the region once more. In 1999, NATO resumed bombing Serbian targets and successfully pressured Milosevic to surrender. In 2001, Milosevic was arrested and placed in the custody of the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague. Since 1996, the Tribunal had been collecting evidence that linked Milosevic to the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Milosevic died in custody still awaiting the verdict of his trial in 2006.

**Conclusion**

The convoluted nature of the genocide against Muslims and Croats in Bosnia caused the U.S. position on the matter to traverse party lines. Senator Bob Dole, a Republican, proved his support of U.S. intervention by pushing for the lifting of the arms embargo, as well as pushing others in his party to support Clinton’s deployment of troops to take part in IFOR. Simultaneously, Clinton had to convince some Democrats that taking a stance in Bosnia was the right move. During the entirety of the conflict, the American public wavered on its opinion of whether or not the U.S. should get involved despite the plethora of journalistic reports describing the brutality of the ethnic cleansing. Clinton won the 1996 election, just after committing 20,000 American troops to IFOR. Even though this action was politically risky because public support for intervention fluctuated, things turned out well, as there were not large numbers of U.S. casualties.
Clinton was successful in accomplishing the goals he initially stated regarding Bosnia. He provided humanitarian relief in conjunction with the United Nations. Under Clinton, the United States helped defend the no-fly zone and sponsor the Dayton Peace Accords as part of NATO. Some criticize the U.S. Bosnian intervention because it seemed to take longer than Clinton initially estimated. However, had he not faced multilateral opposition to intervention, the conflict could have been resolved much sooner. For example, one of Clinton’s arguments against his predecessor, President Bush, was that he had left too much up to the Europeans. Once in office, Clinton realized that working with the allies was a laborious, time-intensive task. This was especially evident when NATO took over a month to plan the airstrikes. The other main factor that impeded Clinton’s vision for Bosnia was domestic reluctance. He was restricted by his foreign policy advisors who urged cooperation with the United Nations. Also, Colin Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a holdover from the Bush Administration, was determined to continue the policy of nonintervention. Finally, Clinton was concerned by mixed public opinions, none of which supported direct U.S. military intervention. Nevertheless, President Clinton held firm to his conviction to intervene in Bosnia. He stopped the fighting. He sent U.S. troops to keep the peace. He supported the creation of an International Criminal Tribunal to investigate ethnic cleansing. Finally, he ended the war in Bosnia.

The historical views on whether or not Clinton took the correct actions in Bosnia are widespread. Some historians look at the 200,000 murders overseen by Milosevic and concluded that the number could have been reduced if Clinton had acted sooner. On the other side of the spectrum, some historians believe that Clinton was wrong for sending U.S. troops to Bosnia, that his intentions were imperialistic rather than humanitarian. In a completely different way, my perspective shows how according Clinton systematically established realistic objectives for Bosnia and saw them successfully come to fruition during his presidency.

Endnotes
2 Ibid. 406.
3 Ibid. 391.
4 Ibid. 407.
7 Ibid.
9 Power, 247.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 249.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 269.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
28 Daalder, 8.
29 Ibid., 9.
30 Ibid.
31 Power, 304-310.
32 Bob Minzesheimer, “The 100-day Dash: Comparing Clinton,” *USA Today*, April 27, 1993, p. 6A.
33 Daalder, 9-10.
35 Power, 310.
36 Ibid., 311.
38 Ibid.
39 Power, 391-392.
40 Ibid., 420.
41 Ibid., 423.
42 Ibid., 429.
43 Ibid., 440.
45 Daalder, 179.
47 Rothkopf, 68.

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