



Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 23: Providing A Haven for Refugees: an Alternative to U.S. Military Intervention in the Balkans

April 12, 1993

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Executive Summary

This study proposes that the United States open its borders to refugees from the fighting in the former Yugoslavia. It denounces as inhumane the current policy of the United States, the European Community, and the United Nations of compelling would-be refugees to remain in their devastated homeland as pawns to thwart Serbian territorial objectives. It also points out that even if a political solution to the current round of fighting can be found, many of the displaced people will not want to return home because of well-founded fears that they will become victims of revenge slayings and other forms of persecution.

The author shows how the United States would benefit economically from admitting Yugoslavian refugees while helping to defuse tensions in the Balkans. Social and economic "nativist" arguments against a liberal immigration policy are examined and refuted. The study concludes that providing a haven for refugees would be more cost-effective and far less dangerous than using military force in a futile attempt to impose a settlement to the Yugoslavian conflict.

Introduction

Advocates of U.S. intervention in the Balkans have framed the debate in stark terms: either the United States intervenes forcefully to save Bosnia, or Washington refuses to act and allows hundreds of thousands of people to die while the conflict spins out of control. Those who oppose the use of American military power to halt the fighting in the Balkans are tarred as isolationists or appeasers.[1] New York Times columnist Leslie H. Gelb writes: "Diplomacy without force is farce, but that is the present Western-U.N. course. It is cynical farce, for all the realists and neoisolationists who espouse it know they are winking at Serbian genocide and merely delaying their inevitable confrontation with Serbia, at unforgivable cost in Muslim lives." [2]

If Americans believe genocide or military intervention are the only choices, the post-Cold War hawks reason, they are much more likely to support aggressive U.S. involvement. But the interventionist prescription ignores a promising option: providing a haven in the United States for more refugees from troubled regions, including the Balkans, while avoiding the risks of armed intervention.

The conflict in the former Yugoslavia has generated a tremendous amount of suffering. Thousands of people have been killed during the fighting, and more than 2 million have been forced from their homes.[3]

Supporters of intervention cite the plight of those refugees, and the fear that many more millions will be displaced if fighting spreads, as justification for U.S. action. If the United States and its principal allies refuse to act, so the argument goes, much of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union will explode in conflict. If that doomsday

scenario is played out, it will produce a flood of refugees that will overwhelm Western Europe, an area of vital importance to the United States.

The West and the Balkan Refugees

Despite superheated rhetoric, there are alternatives to invading the Balkans or watching thousands of innocent people die. One of the most sensible steps that Washington and its European allies could take would be to accept more refugees from the region. About half of the 600,000 people who have found refuge in countries outside the Balkans are in Germany, and most of the rest have found shelter in Austria (73,000), Switzerland (80,000), Sweden (62,000), and Hungary (40,000).[4] The United States has offered to accept a paltry 300 Bosnian families, a total of about 1,000 people. To put that into perspective, consider the fact that Malawi, an African nation of 8 million people with a gross domestic product of only \$2.18 billion, has taken in nearly a million refugees from the fighting in Mozambique.[5]

In 1992, 830,000 immigrants were allowed to enter the United States legally, and roughly another 300,000 settled here illegally.[6] Included in that total are some 120,000 refugees who were fleeing political persecution. Though some critics claim that U.S. immigration is at record levels, the number of immigrants is lower in absolute terms than it was at the turn of the century when the U.S. population was much smaller.[7] Washington could both increase the number of traditional immigrants it accepts and allocate more spaces for refugees. University of Maryland economist Julian Simon suggests that the United States reform its policy by doubling its immigrant quota. Assuming that there were no great problems in absorbing that number of people, Washington could continue to increase the number of immigrants it accepted.[8] That would allow the United States to shelter several hundred thousand Balkan refugees this year, and perhaps more in the years to come.

The displaced people could be given the option of returning to their native lands if a political settlement were found or of remaining in the United States as permanent residents. At the same time, Washington could press its European allies, many of whom have refused to accept refugees even as they have called for U.S. military intervention, to accept similarly large numbers. That would greatly ease the suffering in the Balkans and achieve a number of important U.S. foreign and domestic policy goals.

There are several factors that explain the U.S. refusal to accept more refugees. One objection is that allowing desperate people to emigrate from their homelands would ratify the policy of "ethnic cleansing." If Bosnian Muslims were permitted to leave their country, others, mainly Serbs and Croats, would occupy the land. Thus, the more powerful factions would gain their war aims while members of the weakest faction would be forced to flee to the United States or other countries.

Another objection is that a liberal policy toward Bosnian refugees will set a bad precedent for other areas. If aggressive ethnic groups in other regions see that the United States and other countries will accept immigrants, critics contend, they will use the same tactics as the Serbs and Croats have. That would generate millions of refugees--a flood that would overwhelm the industrial countries.

Finally, there is the nativist argument that immigration in general is undesirable because foreigners take good jobs away from "real Americans"; the United States is already overcrowded; and, besides, "they just aren't like us."

The Ethical Dilemma of Allowing Refugees to Emigrate

Serbian forces, who currently occupy roughly 70 percent of Bosnia, have offered to allow Muslims to leave the captured territories. According to the Washington Post, that offer has presented international officials with an "ethical dilemma: should they help evacuate civilians and thus assist the Serb ethnic cleansing campaign, or should they refuse to do so and leave the civilians to die from exposure or Serb gunfire?"[9] Thus far, the international community has discouraged emigration, accepting the argument that allowing victims of war to leave would solidify Serbian gains. That has resulted in one of the cruelest aspects of the international response to the war.

UN forces, deployed in Bosnia on an allegedly humanitarian mission, have gone so far as to force people fleeing Sarajevo, as many as 500 a day at times, to return to the besieged city. "It breaks our hearts," said a French soldier who has turned back old women and mothers with babies. "They cry, they plead with us for help to cross. They even offer

money. But we're under orders to stop them." [10] Even Bosnian Muslim forces, purportedly defending their fellow citizens, have refused to allow civilians to leave some cities because they fear their departure would "undermine the morale of their fighters and would amount to another chapter in the Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing." [11]

Those who claim that accepting refugees would ensure "ethnic cleansing" generally support strong international action to end the fighting. At the price of tolerating the suffering of refugees in the short run, they believe that the conflict can be resolved and displaced persons returned to their homes to live in peace. That argument is badly flawed. First, none of the major powers has shown much interest in becoming deeply involved in the Bosnian dispute. Though the United States and its allies would like the conflict to end, they are unlikely to contribute the massive military resources that would be needed to end the fighting and impose a solution. Since taking office, President Clinton has declared that the United States will not get involved in a peace-making operation in the Balkans. [12] The president is considering limited military action, possibly involving air strikes on Serbian positions to enforce the UN-mandated "no fly zone," but he has ruled out the use of American ground forces to impose a political settlement. The result is a policy that insists that would-be refugees stay in the Balkans so that "ethnic cleansing" can be avoided and that, at the same time, seeks to avoid the high costs of military intervention.

Those troubled by the supposed ethical dilemma surely are not considering the best interests of the potential refugees. Even if a political settlement to the conflict in Bosnia could somehow be found, many people either would be prevented from returning to their homes or would refuse to return because of well-founded fears that they would be persecuted again. They are likely to live tenuously in refugee camps for the next few years, then be forced to resettle in areas that are not their homes and where there are few opportunities. In light of the tremendous devastation of the war, with thousands killed and maimed, there is almost no way to return to the status quo ante or anything resembling it. Those displaced by the fighting would always have to live with the threat of further violence if they returned home. Indeed, it would be astounding if people who had previously waged a bloodthirsty war against their neighbors suddenly decided to live in peace. Instead of hopelessly clinging to the notion that minority rights will be respected around the world at all times--an assumption that is utterly detached from reality in the Balkans--Washington should take concrete steps to allow as many people as possible to rebuild their shattered lives.

It is condescending and paternalistic for foreigners to insist that it is best for Yugoslavians to remain in their devastated homeland. A humane immigration policy would allow refugees to decide their own fate. Optimally, that would involve giving the displaced a wide array of options. Some might choose to stay in the former Yugoslavia or adjacent countries, hoping that they would be able to return to their native lands. Others, faced with the danger to themselves and their families, would decide that they could make a better life elsewhere. In any event, the people who are currently suffering from the effects of war and "ethnic cleansing" should make the decision for themselves. It should not be made for them by UN "humanitarians," self-appointed militia commanders, or officials and pundits living comfortably in Washington, London, or Paris.

International Implications

The argument that accepting some refugees will lead to an uncontrollable exodus is equally flawed. Advocates of intervention insist that the fighting must be stopped or it will spread, perhaps leading to a major conflagration. [13] They argue that the subsequent chaos will then threaten Western Europe and eventually vital American interests. If they really believe that is a serious danger, they should support an expansive refugee policy. Such a policy would defuse tension in the Balkans and make it less likely that conflict would spread and generate untold numbers of additional refugees.

Regardless of U.S. involvement in the Balkans, there is little doubt that the post-Cold War world will produce instability and regional conflict, resulting in sizable numbers of displaced people. [14] However, that unfortunate fact does not mean that the United States must refuse to take Balkan refugees. There is probably a limit to the number of immigrants a nation can absorb, but the United States is nowhere near that limit. That bridge should be crossed when (or, more accurately, if) Washington comes to it.

Finally, it is absurd to argue that other tyrants would learn from this example and oppress their minorities in order to force them to emigrate. The sad reality is that millions of people are being oppressed by rival ethnic groups right now.

There are dozens of conflicts in the former Soviet Union alone and hundreds more around the world. Atrocities have been committed for centuries and are likely to continue to be committed regardless of U.S. immigration policy. A sound and practical policy would help many people, not attempt to build a quixotic scheme for guaranteeing individual rights around the globe.

The Economic Impact of Refugees

A general argument against increased immigration, which would presumably apply to refugees as well, asserts that immigrants hurt the United States economically. Foreigners, it is alleged, take jobs from Americans, use scarce government resources without paying their fair share in taxes, contribute to overcrowding in American cities, and devour scarce natural resources. University of Maryland economist Julian Simon, however, disputes those arguments in his seminal work *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*. Simon concludes that immigrants, including refugees,[15] contribute more to the economy, work harder, and have a higher propensity to start new businesses and create new markets than do natives. They also contribute more to the tax base than they use in services.[16] They do not, as critics often allege, have a higher propensity to commit crimes, to be unemployed, or to use social services.

Furthermore, greater numbers of immigrants would create more resources than they would deplete. In addition to expanding markets, population growth increases society's stock of knowledge, leading to innovation and ensuring that resources will be used more efficiently.[17] The economic data strongly suggest that the United States could do good for the refugees in the Balkans while doing well for itself at home.

The Nativist Argument

Finally, there is the argument that foreigners from non-Western societies cannot assimilate well into the culture of the United States. Peter Brimelow, a senior editor at *Forbes*, argues that today's immigrants are different from yesterday's, mainly because they do not come from West European countries. He worries that whites, who currently make up 75.6 percent of the population, could represent just 61 percent by the year 2020.[18] Brimelow's argument is based on his particular conception of cultural and ethnic differences. "It should not be necessary to explain that the legacy of Shaka and Cetewayo--overthrown just over a century ago--is not that of Alfred the Great, let alone Elizabeth II or any civilized society." [19] Brimelow manages to forget that Europe, even in this century, has produced its share of barbaric leaders. If Africans today are heirs to Shaka, are Europeans heirs to Hitler or Stalin?

Brimelow's argument does not square with the millions of immigrants, many from authoritarian nations, who have assimilated and prospered in the United States. There is little evidence to suggest that past immigrants have radically altered American traditions. In a rejoinder to Brimelow, Julian Simon points out that U.S. politics, law, language, and customs have remained distinct, despite large numbers of immigrants.[20] Simon concludes: "If you don't enjoy seeing foreign-looking faces on the street or subway--and Peter Brimelow says that this is so for him--neither economics nor demography proves you 'wrong' or illogical. But you must accept that you and I pay a price for not allowing in more immigrants--a lower standard of living than otherwise, a bigger federal deficit, and poorer international competitiveness." [21]

Yet even those who fret about problems of assimilation and advocate a restrictive immigration policy should not be strongly opposed to allowing Yugoslavian refugees to come to the United States. After all, they are Europeans and should be able to assimilate without undue difficulty. Indeed, except for the fact that most of the Bosnian refugees would be Muslims rather than Christians, there would seem to be little to offend the sensibilities of Brimelow and his cohorts. Many of the new immigrants would also have high levels of education and marketable economic skills, which would further reduce the likelihood that they would end up on the public dole.

The Benefits of Accepting Refugees from the Balkans

By accepting more refugees from the Balkans, the United States would achieve a number of important goals. It would immediately ease tension in the region by offering a legitimate alternative to those at risk. Numerous analysts have argued that the refugee problem is one of the gravest dangers emanating from the Yugoslavian conflict. Leslie Gelb argues that the threat posed by refugees is one of the key elements explaining Bosnia's strategic importance to the United States. He says that "the Serbs' 'ethnic cleansing' is driving hundreds of thousands of Bosnian Muslims into

Western Europe, igniting right-wing reactions, especially in Germany." [22] Stephen John Stedman of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies writes, "Hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Balkan war place heavy burdens on newly independent east European states undergoing transitions to democracy." [23]

Both analysts are correct about the refugee problem, but they ignore the option of sheltering refugees in the United States and elsewhere, preferring instead to support dangerous military action to (somehow) impose peace in the Balkans. Germany is undoubtedly feeling the pressure of the costs of unification combined with a welfare state system that provides generous benefits to refugees. If the United States and other countries were willing to take a larger share of the refugees, however, Germany would be under much less strain. Fears of fascist reactions would be lessened because the refugees would emigrate to many countries, thus diffusing potential opposition.

Opponents of emigration also fail to understand that the presence of millions of refugees will lead to long-term regional problems in the Balkans, even if a workable solution to the current round of fighting can be found. No matter how the international community responds, there is virtually no chance that the parties to the conflict will return to their previous borders and miraculously decide to live in peace. As long as there are millions of people living in the region who feel they have been slighted, there will be the prospect of renewed fighting. Given the number of people who have been killed, maimed, and displaced, there is likely to be a long period of revenge killings and violent reprisals. If refugees are offered the opportunity to rebuild their lives in prosperous industrial countries, they are likely to find their new circumstances much more favorable than living among their former enemies. There is also every reason to believe that Balkan refugees would leave behind old antagonisms as have millions of other American immigrants.

Perhaps most convincing, though, a humane policy offers important humanitarian benefits by presenting a real opportunity to ease suffering in the Balkans. It is time for Western governments to admit that they cannot solve the Yugoslavian conflict. Even massive intervention, which would be extraordinarily costly in lives and money, gives no guarantee of ending the fighting. Furthermore, there is almost no chance that the American people (or those of any other nation) would be willing to pay the costs of massive intervention and extended occupation. The United States, then, should stop suggesting that it can resolve the conflict through the use of military force at a reasonable cost and begin to take concrete steps to assist those displaced by war.

Accepting refugees would be far less costly in American lives and money than conducting a military operation in the Balkans. The Serbs, against whom intervention would be primarily directed, inherited much of the former Yugoslav army, a relatively potent force. In addition, the terrain of the Balkans is rugged and mountainous, which would facilitate guerrilla warfare against any invaders. Those who casually contemplate "limited" military intervention would do well to remember that Nazi Germany, despite its extremely harsh occupation policies and the presence of some 30 army divisions in Yugoslavia, was unable to pacify the country.

It is impossible to predict the financial cost of U.S. intervention, but it is almost certain to be high. The U.S. operation in Somalia--involving 26,000 American troops at its peak--is costing the Pentagon \$30 million to \$40 million per day. [24] An open-ended commitment to maintain peace in the Balkans would probably cost even more.

The many relief operations currently run by the United Nations, the United States, the European Community, and private organizations are merely palliatives that will do nothing to resolve long-term regional problems. However, if foreign countries, led by the United States, opened their borders, they would give refugees the opportunity, not only to survive this year or next, but to prosper in the years ahead. The proposal, of course, is also voluntary at its core. It leaves the ultimate decision to the refugees themselves. If they feel it is in their best interests to stay in the former Yugoslavia, they will do so. If not, at least they will have the option of leaving.

Instead of invoking the so-called lessons of Munich and calling for massive U.S. military intervention, American pundits and politicians should remember the lessons of their own country's restrictive refugee policies during the 1930s and early 1940s. [25] In May 1939 the United States turned away from its shores the *St. Louis*, a ship loaded with 933 passengers, mainly Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. The refugees had hoped to find a temporary haven in Cuba while they awaited the U.S. visas for which they had applied. When they were not permitted to enter Cuba, the passengers were forced to return to Europe, soon to be conquered by Nazi armies. That incident was in keeping with the U.S. policy of

allowing relatively few of Hitler's victims to find shelter in America. Of the hundreds of thousands who applied for visas during the 1930s (many more were probably discouraged by the restrictive U.S. laws), only about 100,000 German and Austrian Jews were allowed to immigrate.[26]

It is, of course, too late to help those who perished at the hands of the Nazis, but it is not too late to help those who face persecution today. The United States and its allies could assist the refugees, defuse regional tensions, and reap the economic and cultural benefits of increased immigration, while avoiding the costs that would be incurred by an aggressive Balkan policy. It is a no-lose policy, one far preferable to a dangerous military intervention in the former Yugoslavia.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Anthony Lewis, "Beware of Munich," *New York Times*, January 8, 1993, p. A25.

[2] Leslie H. Gelb, "Balkan Strategy, Part II," *New York Times*, February 28, 1993, p. E15.

[3] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Office of the Special Envoy for Former Yugoslavia, "Information Notes on Former Yugoslavia," n.p., January 22, 1993.

[4] Stephen Kinzer, "Israel Accepts 84 of Bosnia's Muslim Refugees," *New York Times*, February 18, 1993, p. A9.

[5] Tim Carrington, "Current Policies about Refugees Leave Bosnians and Others Out in the Cold," *Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 1993, p. A11.

[6] "Immigration Overview," Federation for American Immigration Reform, Washington, March 16, 1993.

[7] Julian L. Simon, "Why Control the Borders?" *National Review*, February 1, 1993, p. 28.

[8] Julian L. Simon, *The Economic Consequences of Immigration* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

[9] Peter Maass, "Bosnian Serbs Press Attack, Propose Civilian Evacuation," *Washington Post*, March 5, 1993, p. A1.

[10]10. "U.N. Keepers of the Siege," *Washington Post*, December 30, 1992, p. A1.

[11] Chuck Sudetic, "Serbs Again Agree to Allow Evacuation of Muslims," *New York Times*, March 9, 1993, p. A6.

[12] Daniel Williams, "U.N. Chief Rebuffed on the Use of GIs," *Washington Post*, March 9, 1993, p. A15.

[13] See, for example, George Kenney, "Blueprint for a Wider War," *New York Times*, September 30, 1992, p. A25. Kenney argues that the war could spread to Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia, Greece, Turkey, and various other Muslim countries and eventually involve the Western powers and Russia. He believes the probability of that happening is "greater than 50- 50."

[14] See, for example, David Binder and Barbara Crossette, "As Ethnic Wars Multiply, U.S. Strives for a Policy," *New York Times*, February 7, 1993, p. A1.

[15] Simon, *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*, p. 314.

[16] Simon, *The Economic Consequences of Immigration*.

[17] Economist David Osterfeld notes that the prices of virtually all natural resources have fallen dramatically over the last 100 years. Since prices reflect scarcity, it is clear that resources are becoming relatively less scarce as humans learn to use them more efficiently. See David Osterfeld, *Prosperity versus Planning: How Government Stifles Economic Growth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 84-103.

[18] Peter Brimelow, "Time to Rethink Immigration?" *National Review*, June 22, 1992, p. 31.

[19] Ibid., p. 38.

[20] Simon, "Why Control the Borders?" p. 28.

[21] Ibid., p. 29.

[22] Leslie H. Gelb, "Balkan Strategy, Part I," New York Times, February 25, 1993, p. A19.

[23] Stephen John Stedman, "The New Interventionists," Foreign Affairs 72, no. 1, America and the World, 1992/93 (1993): 9.

[24] Stuart Auerbach, "It Just Seems Our Job Is Done," Washington Post, March 1, 1993, p. A11.

[25] See, for example, David S. Wyman, Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); and Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[26] Ibid., p. 9.