



Unheeded Warning of War:

Why Policymakers Ignored the 1990 Yugoslavia Estimate

Intelligence & Policy, October 2015

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Center for the Study of Intelligence
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Washington, DC 20505

October 2015

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This report is based on a review of unclassified documents, publicly available oral history interviews, and interviews with senior policymakers involved in supporting the White House during the administrations of George H. W. Bush, William Clinton, and George H. Bush. This research was sponsored by the Center for the Study of Intelligence and conducted by RAND.

CIA Support to Policymakers: Unheeded Warning of War: Why Policymakers Ignored the 1990 Yugoslavia Estimate

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ISBN 978-1-929667-28-4

This monograph, originally classified UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY, was first published by the Center for the Study of Intelligence in October 2015; this UNCLASSIFIED version was produced in July 2016.

Center for the Study of Intelligence
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Introduction

Yugoslavia will cease to function as a federal state within one year and will probably dissolve within two. Economic reform will not stave off the breakup.

With this stark language, the October 1990 US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), *Yugoslavia Transformed* (NIE 15-90), forecast Yugoslavia's disintegration.^a The NIE judged that the breakup would be violent and the conflict might spill over into adjacent regions. It included a paragraph on Bosnia—calling it “the greatest threat” of violence—but was more focused on Kosovo, where fighting seemed imminent.

a. The estimate has been declassified. See NIE 15-90, “Yugoslavia Transformed,” 18 October 1990, in *Yugoslavia: From “National Communism” to National Collapse: US Intelligence Community Estimative Products on Yugoslavia, 1948–1990*, (NIC 2006-004), US Government Printing Office, December 2006. The publication is also available at www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_home.html under Declassified NIC Publications.

Still, the NIE was stunningly prescient, unambiguously direct, and contained no dissenting footnotes. To the extent that policymakers saw and digested the estimate, intelligence succeeded in providing timely warning. Nevertheless, the NIE had no apparent impact on policy. It quickly leaked, leading veteran *Washington Post* editor Stephen Rosenfeld to observe, “It is a serious matter when the United States comes to a view that a friendly sovereign state may soon disappear . . . political chatter and newspaper talk are one thing and a formal verdict by a great power’s intelligence service another.”¹

What accounts for the lack of policy response? The case of the 1990 Yugoslavia NIE provides an opportunity to explore why intelligence went unheeded, particularly when the atmosphere surrounding the issue was not intensely political.



Key Findings

The four lessons from the 1990 Yugoslavia estimate encompass both analytic tradecraft and the often challenging relationship between intelligence and policy—lessons that are perhaps all the more apt as US policymakers grapple with separatist issues, not only with Crimea and Ukraine, but also in Europe and around the globe.

- *Engaging with policymakers and understanding their priorities is critical to ensuring that warning leads to action.*

This is an old issue manifest in the analytic debate between what are often called the Robert Gates and Sherman Kent models of analysis. The first counsels engagement with policy lest analysis be irrelevant; the latter counsels separation lest analysis be overly influenced by policy. In this case, if the NIE drafters had been better linked to policymakers, they might have crafted an analysis more closely tied to decisionmakers' interests, leading to more concrete action. According to former National Security Council Director for European Affairs Robert Hutchings, "It would have been a better estimate if done in closer communication with policymakers. If they had asked, 'What are you thinking?' This kind of interplay between the Intelligence and policy communities is still timid, but more likely now than it was at the time."²

Competing demands for policymakers' attention were partially responsible for inaction on the Yugoslavia NIE. In 1990, senior policymakers were focused on the fall of communist governments in

Eastern Europe and developments in the Soviet Union, which would collapse less than a year later. In addition, policymakers were seized with developing a response in the Persian Gulf, where Iraq had only three months before invaded Kuwait. The rush of events was dazzling in this case, but such a pace has become normal in Washington. Often, the risk is that distracted policymakers will not notice or register a particular warning. In this case, the NIE did gain policymakers' attention. However, decisionmakers had their hands full. Some had already been informed about the situation in Yugoslavia but lacked a plan of action. As one policymaker put it, "NIEs aren't expected to flag alternative courses of action. The NIE basically confirmed what I already knew. Nor did it tell me what I needed to know . . . some course of action the consequences of which would not be horrible. . . . The NIE didn't electrify the policy world. It didn't affect the judgment of senior policymakers who were already concerned or of those at the cabinet level whose attitude was 'we don't want any of this right now.'"³

- *Policymakers who are substantive experts may be especially resistant to warning.*

The deep knowledge several key senior policymakers held on Yugoslavia may have hindered their ability to accept the messages in NIE 15-90. Many—notably National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger—were "Yugoslav hands" and perhaps were loath to hear that the country was falling apart. Not only did they know all the reasons why Yugoslavia was

as it was, they also felt it was a wonderful solution to the ethnic and economic divides that lay beneath the country's unified exterior. For many senior policymakers, discounting the new information presented in the NIE and the drastic policy changes it suggested was easier than modifying long-held convictions and beliefs about Yugoslavia and its stability.

- *The likelihood that policymakers will take action based on intelligence warnings increases when such analyses include opportunities.*

Although the Yugoslavia NIE made clear and hard-hitting judgments, it did not include any opportunities for the United States to influence the outcome. The NIE's lack of opportunity analysis exploring the range of policy options in Yugoslavia might have stymied policymaker action. As one senior official put it, decisionmakers felt helpless. Some said they did not believe they could do anything about the situation, and the NIE implied there was nothing to be done, even pouring cold water on one potentially hopeful initiative, economic reform.

An NIE that offered something positive to take into the situation room could have been more useful. The State Department's acting assistant secretary for European affairs, James Dobbins, noted that it would have been helpful for the NIE to show "pressure points" and areas for potential engagement. Otherwise, "You might as well send it straight to the outbox."⁴

As one policymaker put it:

The focus on preventing intelligence analysis from contamination by policy preferences can result in insufficient regard to what policymakers care about or need to hear. . . . There should have been an additional analytical thrust. The first step was to get people to accept the [key judgments] that the US couldn't keep Humpty Dumpty together any longer. This was

a hard enough sell, but might have been easier if followed by a second step. . . . First, say Yugoslavia is going to fall apart. Second, present some scenarios for managing dissolution.⁵

The counterargument, in this case, is that adding opportunity analysis might have pushed an already "indigestible" estimate to the breaking point. According to Martin van Heuven, the former NIO for Europe who commissioned the NIE, "If we had tried, we probably wouldn't have had a unanimous estimate. We probably would have destroyed the estimate by overloading it with issues beyond the horizon at that point."⁶ And the writers of the NIE were defensive about the reaction from policymakers that they "couldn't do anything with that estimate." For Van Heuven, "That was unfair, a shot across the bow. It wasn't the function of the estimate to apply a yardstick to what policy the administration should adopt."⁷

- *Policymakers read intelligence reports in the context of popular concepts.*

Yugoslavia's collapse was seen by policymakers through a Cold War lens, one that distorted more than it clarified. When viewed through such a prism, self-determination—which played a powerful but pernicious role in determining the future of Yugoslavia—became a realistic rather than an idealistic concept. It was aimed at Soviet satellites, as a way to argue for independence in more polite language than "containment" or "rollback." Tactical reasons for embracing self-determination for soon-to-be former Soviet republics ultimately led to strategic regrets in the case of Yugoslavia. German politics and the then-recent history of unification made it hard for the Germans to argue against self-determination for Slovenia, and especially Croatia, which had a voluble diaspora in Germany. Yet the trail from Slovenian independence to bloody Bosnia was hard to avoid.⁸



Building—and Assessing—Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia was created out of shards of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires in the wake of World War I, a merger of former territories of Austria-Hungary with the independent kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes—Yugoslavia’s official title in its early years—was recognized by the Council of Ambassadors in Paris in July 1922, and the Serbian royal dynasty became the Yugoslav royal house. The country was invaded by the Axis powers in 1941. Three years later the partisan resistance proclaimed a Democratic Federal Yugoslavia, which was recognized by the king as the legitimate government. However, the monarchy was soon abolished and in 1946 a communist government came to power, led by Josip Broz Tito, the partisan leader, who ruled until his death in 1980. In 1963, the country was renamed the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

If the intricate downplaying of ethnicity under Tito’s firm rule was one hallmark of Yugoslavia, the other was independence. Soviet-Yugoslav relations quickly deteriorated, punctuated by deep personal animosity between Stalin and Tito, and Yugoslavia was expelled from the Soviet Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) in 1948. Although not necessarily seeking that outcome, Yugoslavia effectively declared its independence from Moscow and Tito became a founding father of the Non-Aligned Movement. Thus began Tito’s “Yugoslav experiment,” a 30-year effort to create a state

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) Process

NIEs are produced through a painstaking—and sometimes painful—interagency process. The process begins with a request, sometimes from a senior policymaker or from Congress but at other times generated by the NIC itself, as in this case. One or sometimes two NIOs lead the process, preparing a terms of reference (TOR) for the document. TORs are subjected to peer reviews within the NIC and passed to various intelligence agencies and components for comment. With terms of reference agreed upon, the drafting begins. Sometimes the drafting is done within the NIC itself, but often an analyst is seconded to the NIC by another agency—most often CIA—to do the drafting. The draft is reviewed within the NIC, and then subjected to what is called, perhaps with some euphemism, “coordination.” Each agency contributing to the NIE reviews the draft independently, and then the agency representatives assemble to go over the draft line by line.

that was communist in name and political system but independent in practice.^a

In what Warren Zimmerman, the last US ambassador to Yugoslavia, called an “extraordinary act of enlightened statesmanship,”⁹ the United States

a. The term “Yugoslav experiment” first appears in the estimative record as the title of NIE 15-67, *The Yugoslav Experiment*, 13 April 1967. (See NIC 2006-004).

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, 1990



quickly embraced Tito's split from Moscow, making Yugoslavia Washington's favorite communist country. This move sprang from an early conviction that Yugoslavia was a "vital link" in the West's defense strategy given its geopolitical significance as a buffer between East and West.^a The early embrace led to excellent intelligence access—reporting on Yugoslavia benefited from extensive information gained through years of political and economic engagement.¹⁰

In total, 34 estimative reports on Yugoslavia spanned 1948 to 1990. These products, comprising memoranda and formally coordinated reports, drew on intelligence reporting from the various components of the US Intelligence Community (IC) and present a holistic (if not comprehensive) view of intelligence analysis on Yugoslavia. The reports were first produced by CIA's Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE), then the Office of National Estimates (ONE), and ultimately by National Intelligence Officers (NIOs) of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), which became an IC-wide organization working for the Director of Central Intelligence and later for the Director of National Intelligence.¹¹

This stream of intelligence proved consistently sound. With one glaring exception—a failure to foresee Yugoslavia's expulsion from COMECON in 1948^b—there were no major surprises. Most of the intelligence judgments dealt with a handful of cross-cutting themes that would later prove prescient, including Yugoslav cohesion and internal threats, long-term viability of the state, and US interests in Yugoslav stability.

Yugoslav cohesion was a matter of perennial interest. With "six republics, five nationalities, four

languages, three religions, two alphabets, and one party,"¹² Yugoslavia layered a complex ethnic landscape on top of acrimonious histories. Its ability to keep these diverse groups unified was attributed to two main factors: the Soviet threat and Tito's rule. The threat of Soviet or satellite intervention created a centripetal force, unifying republics from the outside in.

In the early years of Tito's rule, the Kremlin sought to eliminate him. Yet Moscow was loath to use direct force and instead attempted different subversive measures, as well as political and economic pressure. Fears of invasion waned with time, but even as Yugoslav-Soviet relations thawed, the Intelligence Community assessed that Tito's successors would continue to prize independence, with the specter of Soviet intervention as "its greatest incentive for remaining a single, cohesive state."¹³

Tito balanced competing ethnic groups by creating a federal system that blended local autonomy with proportional representation to keep the republics knit together. By 1961, an NIE concluded, "The regime has succeeded in containing traditional nationalist and religious animosities within the country. . . . Much of the success achieved in containing [traditional] antagonisms is owing to Tito himself."¹⁴ This sense of "Tito exceptionalism" persisted, with another NIE observing six years later that, "Yugoslavia under Tito is an unusual laboratory of statecraft."¹⁵

Despite his success, Tito proved unable to construct a system that would survive him. Yugoslavia pre-dated Tito, but intelligence analysts grew concerned that it might not outlive him. They judged that he was "truly irreplaceable," noting,

Though Tito is not blind to the problem his departure will create, this is one area of potential dissension in which his genius for compromise and improvisation cannot fully be brought to bear. It is possible for a man to arrange for his

a. The first NIE on Yugoslavia in 1950 highlights the country's strategic importance to the Western and Soviet blocs, both for control of the Eastern Mediterranean and as a launching point for attacks. See NIE-7, *The Current Situation in Yugoslavia*, 21 November 1950, in NIC 2006-004.

b. Marten Van Heuven, the National Intelligence Officer (NIO) who commissioned the 1990 Yugoslavia NIE, contends that labeling this a failure is unfair because an Intelligence Community had not yet been formed to make such an assessment. Van Heuven in NIC 2006-004, xi.

*own funeral, but it is difficult for him to play a very active role in it.*¹⁶

Threats to the Belgrade government were rooted in economic disparities and divisive histories. Redistributive policies fostered resentment. Economic development split along geographic lines, with thriving Croatia and Slovenia in the northwest bitter about subsidizing the welfare of the southeast: “The southern republics are still backward and the more prosperous northerners still resent having to help them out.”¹⁷ Over time, the gap widened. An intelligence appraisal in 1971 noted the disparity in unemployment rates, concluding, “Partly as a result of the revival of old nationalistic stirrings, the poorer republics have become increasingly aware of their backwardness and bitter about progress in the north.”¹⁸

In the early years of the Yugoslav experiment, nationalism was an antidote to communist ideology, and Tito’s “insistence upon representing himself as a Yugoslav nationalist” served as a unifying influence. Yet analysts also saw a different, centrifugal type of nationalism. In 1972, a CIA memo observed, “There is a large problem inherent in the Titoist emphasis on nationalism: there are other kinds of nationalism—Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian, etc.—which flourish in Yugoslavia, and they are directed essentially against one another and against Belgrade.”¹⁹

With its porous borders and poor geographic defenses, Yugoslavia was particularly vulnerable to invasion. To forestall would-be attackers, Belgrade devised the “All People’s Defense” strategy, which was signed into law in 1969.²⁰ This military doctrine built a two-tiered structure comprising Territorial Defense Forces (TDFs), or republic militias, alongside the central armed forces, the Yugoslav National Army (JNA). In the event of an invasion, the JNA would mount a conventional defense while the TDF would fall back into the mountains to wage a prolonged resistance effort in terrain ideal for guerrilla warfare. The unintended result was to create trained republic forces capable of fighting each other. A

1991 assessment of Yugoslavia’s military capabilities noted grimly that the “dual nature of Yugoslavia’s military structure . . . provides the groundwork for civil war,” having in essence “equipped the entire society for war.”²¹

Although US engagement in the Balkans predated the Cold War, Washington’s interests leading up to 1990 continued to be seen through a Soviet prism. Marten van Heuven, the NIO who commissioned NIE 15-90, was well aware that the Soviet-centric lens was coloring Yugoslav intelligence reporting. Looking back, he reflects, “On the one hand, the large role the Soviet Union plays as a backdrop to the Yugoslav issue is striking. . . . On the other hand, the estimates on Yugoslavia do not reflect much of an effort to put the course of the country into the mainstream of the evolution of Europe.”²²

The Soviet focus had two unintended consequences for intelligence analysis. First, the context was global rather than regional. Analysis focused on what Yugoslav developments meant for the US-Soviet balance of power, not what they meant for Yugoslavia’s neighbors (and vice versa). Second, Yugoslavia’s internal developments and prognosis for stability were consistently interpreted in light of the Cold War threat rather than the prospects for sustaining a viable state for its own purposes. Yet, that rather distant perspective operated in both directions: the long-running intelligence judgment was that Tito viewed his relationship with the West strictly as a “marriage of convenience.”²³

Overall, the estimative record presented a series of accurate judgments: The Soviets never invaded, cohesion lasted beyond Tito’s death, US influence remained limited as Yugoslavia kept its friends to the East and West at arm’s length, and nationalist undercurrents grew stronger with the passage of time. Robert Gates, Director of Central Intelligence from 1991 to 1993, viewed the record as testimony to good intelligence:

[I]t also often falls to CIA to provide historical perspective, and that’s what CIA had been doing throughout the ’80s and before Tito

died, in essence saying, “When he goes, this whole thing is likely to come apart.” And it is a tremendous success story because CIA was

absolutely on the mark. They had exactly the right perspective.²⁴



The Making of NIE 15-90

After Tito's death in 1980, a power-sharing constitution went into effect. The new design transferred control to a rotating presidency across representatives from each of the six republics and two autonomous provinces, leaving economic power decentralized. Tito's system had worked because of his influence; he was the course corrector when problems arose. Without a decisive arbiter, Yugoslavia's collective rule became a system requiring consensus from all and achieving it from none. The result was political gridlock, economic deterioration, and resurgent ethnic tensions. It was in this context that the last estimative product before NIE 15-90 was published in 1983—Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 15-83, plaintively titled, *Yugoslavia: An Approaching Crisis?*

SNIE 15-83 assessed Yugoslavia's problems as twofold: political and economic. Yugoslavia's leaders were faithfully sticking to Tito's plan and attempting to "muddle through without adequate systemic changes."²⁵ Weak federal control over the economy was leading to severe mismanagement, inter-republic competition, plummeting credit, and rising inflation. SNIE 15-83 warned of looming economic troubles and discussed the benefits of Western assistance. A key judgment noted that, "The West can help Yugoslavia through its immediate financial problems," and observed that US and European aid would signal support for Yugoslav cohesion. "In some ways," the estimate concluded, "the effort itself is as important as the results."²⁶

Resurgent nationalist strains contributed to, and were driven by, economic woes. The gridlocked political system was less and less capable of mediating ethnic tensions, in particular Croat-Serb rivalries, the restive Albanian population in Kosovo, and Serbian stoking of nationalist flames.²⁷ As Van Heuven recollects, "the desire for local autonomy in many sections of the country ran headlong into an increasingly assertive Serbian drive for hegemony"²⁸—a drive Tito's constitution had hoped to forestall.

Although the estimative record was quiet between 1982 and 1990, as early as January 1982 analysts in CIA's Directorate of Intelligence (DI) had homed in on the fundamental, divisive issues that prefigured the collapse of the republic. In a National Intelligence Daily Special Analysis of the issues likely to be addressed at the 12th Congress of the League of Communists in Belgrade in June 1982, DI analysts took note of the important negative impact on stability of Tito's death two years before:

*The 12th Congress...will highlight the country's deep divisions and its lack of strong leadership following Tito's death. Power is likely to remain in the hands of regional leaders, who want continued decentralization of authority and gradual democratization.*²⁹

Two years later, in an Intelligence Assessment entitled "Yugoslavia: Key Questions and Answers on the Debt Crisis," DI analysts returned to the those

issues in addressing the debt crisis into which Yugoslavia had recently entered and blamed the crisis, in part, on the decentralized aspects of Yugoslavia's federation, especially as decentralization played out in Croatia. The study noted that corrective decisions,

*particularly unpopular administrative controls that go against the interests of particularly republics or enterprises are difficult to enforce without the support of republic and local officials.*³⁰

For those who were becoming pessimistic about Yugoslavia's chances for survival, the January 1990 League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) party congress was critical. As US Ambassador Warren Zimmerman described the event, "the League of Communists of Yugoslavia became the first ruling communist party in the world to commit suicide." The congress collapsed after the Slovene delegation, objecting to Serb policy in Kosovo, walked out, and the Croat delegation refused to continue the meeting them.³¹

The next month, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger visited Yugoslavia to signal US support for reform-minded Prime Minister Ante Marković, and gauge conditions firsthand. Eagleburger's grim assessment prompted David Gompert, senior director for Europe and Eurasia on the National Security Council, to ask the State Department to direct US embassies across Europe to warn of deteriorating conditions in Yugoslavia.³² Zimmerman recalls:

*The American message was greeted in Europe with a yawn. The Europeans simply couldn't believe that Yugoslavia was in serious trouble. . . . The French and British governments were particularly dismissive of American concern, putting it off to a fevered Congress and an overwrought executive branch.*³³

Three months prior to Eagleburger's February 1990 trip, Marten van Heuven convened a conference to

discuss the future of Eastern Europe. Meeting in Elkridge, Maryland, the conference participants, who included Intelligence Community and outside experts, recognized that the changes sweeping Europe were destabilizing and that, "In the near term, the process of disintegration will outpace the process of integration."³⁴ Despite noting that changes were due to the "demise of the post-war Stalinist model," a Cold War construct continued to dominate the analysis. The experts concluded that US involvement in Eastern Europe would remain necessary because, "only the US will be capable of engaging the Soviet Union on fundamental issues of stability in the region."³⁵

The mention of Yugoslavia the NIC's conference report was brief but foreboding: "In Yugoslavia, the political community has broken down. There is a considerable danger of chaos and civil war. This would destabilize Romania and revive territorial issues with Hungary, Bulgaria, and Albania."³⁶ Reviewing the report's conclusions, Van Heuven realized it was not business as usual in Yugoslavia: "It jumped out that something was the matter in Yugoslavia, something of a different kind than anything else happening in Europe."³⁷ The following spring, Van Heuven decided to commission an estimate on Yugoslavia. A drafter was assigned and an informal caucus group established.

While the NIE was in draft, Van Heuven visited Belgrade to assess the situation. Reflecting on his findings after his return, Van Heuven and his caucus group were convinced that Yugoslavia was heading for a violent breakup. When the first draft of the NIE was presented, they found the initial conclusion unpersuasive: "They will muddle through, because the collapse of the nation is so dark a future that the Yugoslavs, especially the JNA officer corps, won't allow it to happen."³⁸ The old guarantors of Yugoslav cohesion—the Communist Party and the JNA—no longer seemed strong or credible enough to warrant such an assessment.

Van Heuven reassigned the task to a new drafter. The final NIE's participants included CIA; the Defense Intelligence Agency; the National Secu-

rity Agency; and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Department of State. The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, and the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force, also participated. Working-level officers at State and Defense were aware of the forthcoming conclusions.

The final product, NIE 15-90, *Yugoslavia Transformed*, was published in October 1990. Its judgments were much darker than those of the first draft—and unanimous.³⁹ Yugoslavia would break up violently and there was little anyone could do to stop it. The stark assessment made the unanimity all the more telling. As one of the drafters later noted, “There was little internal disagreement among the major contributors [at the NIC], and there were no footnotes [detailing dissent] from the conclusions of the NIE.”⁴⁰

The NIE: Good Calls, Bad Calls, and Omissions

Overall, the estimate’s judgments were remarkably accurate. Serbian efforts to dominate the political system galvanized secessionist sentiments in Croatia and Slovenia. In turn, Serbia blocked Croat and Slovene attempts to form a looser Yugoslav confederation, pushing both groups to seek dissolution of the state. The NIE projected a lengthy revolt by the Albanians in Kosovo, which the Serbs would attempt to put down. The NIE judged that the Serbs, pinned down militarily in Kosovo, would try to incite uprisings by Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina with the goal of absorbing disputed territory—a goal accompanied by “bloody shifts of population.”⁴¹

The estimate erred on a few points, primarily Kosovo—where the feared violence failed to break out—and on the speed of descent into civil war. The second error was perhaps primarily a function of the first: Serbian military resources were not as tied down in Kosovo as analysts thought, enabling organized warfare elsewhere. The NIE also failed to

address the central role Bosnia-Herzegovina would play in the country’s disintegration. Although noting obliquely that the republic represented “the greatest threat” for violence given its ethnic divisions, it was not until 1991 that a report stated directly, “Bosnia-Herzegovina is at the center of every Yugoslav doomsday scenario.”⁴²

NIE 15-90 judged that impulses toward independence would create mutually exclusive claims and demands on the international community. Efforts to keep Yugoslavia together would be seen as “contradictory to advocacy of democracy and self-determination,”⁴³ while statements supporting self-determination would be taken as justification for secession. Regarding the international community, the NIE bluntly concluded that although Europeans had some leverage over Yugoslavia’s fate, they were not going to use it. They would “pay lip service” to unity but accept disintegration.⁴⁴

Despite its strengths, the estimate made several noteworthy omissions. One missing element was an assessment of the implications for US interests. Many previous estimates, including SNIE 15-83, included a section on US interests; yet between 1983 and 1992, the estimative record, most notably NIE 15-90, is mostly silent on this topic. In the view of the drafters, the loaded message was compelling enough. As Van Heuven noted, “We thought the statement itself was enough: the old years have come to an end, this is a new, violent period.”⁴⁵

Yet the change in strategic context meant changing interests for the United States, its partners, and its old adversaries. Yugoslavia’s significance had changed, as had regional security dynamics. Missing was a discussion of European and Russian interests, capabilities, and intentions. At the time, analysts had difficulty projecting exactly what the European Community or the Soviet Union would look like given the rapid state of change. For years these interests had been defined in the context of the Cold War; the situation beyond the end of the war seemed unclear, or at least unarticulated. The last two lines of NIE 15-90 are telling:

*Russia's position will depend on Moscow's post-Cold-War perception of preferred security arrangements in the Balkans. In short, the eastern and western parts of a transformed Yugoslavia will have to come to terms, each in quite different contexts, with the post-Cold-War architecture of Europe.*⁴⁶

The estimate also did not explore any policy options, given the dire outlook. Asking which interests were involved and, in turn, what the policy options and attendant consequences were, would have required asking different questions—questions the drafters believed fell outside the scope of the estimate. Instead, the NIE offered a pessimistic outlook, concluding flatly: “The United States will have little capacity to preserve Yugoslav unity, notwithstanding the influence it has had there in the past.”⁴⁵

Policymakers' Reactions

Assessing how the estimate was received is no easy task. In retrospect, several policy officials say the NIE didn't tell them anything they did not already know. Yet, sadly, the rush of events validated the estimate, and so by late 1991 the perception that the estimate didn't say anything new was on the mark. At the time it was released, though, Ambassador Zimmerman's reaction was more characteristic: he feared the NIE's outlook would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. “I saw its air of inevitability, in the perfervid atmosphere of Washington, as a major problem,” he later recalled. “I worried that its bald assertion that nothing could be done might take the heart out of American efforts to stave off the worst.”⁴⁸ For one intelligence official involved in the process, the estimate “contradicted a narrative the Embassy had promoted and the [State Department's European] Bureau had accepted since the 1980s. The State Department believed Yugoslavia not only would survive but would develop as a democracy under American—not European (a very important point) tutelage.”⁴⁹

Van Heuven believes the NIE fared better at certain levels of government than others. “NIE 15-90 did find resonance at the working level of the Department of State's European Bureau,” he noted. “At the policy level, however, it was characterized as overblown and greeted with disdain.”⁵⁰ The estimate was quickly leaked to the *New York Times*, whose coverage revealed divergent opinions among US officials. One official told the paper, “I think you can almost write the death certificate now,” while another said, “I am not willing to write them totally off.”⁵¹

Lessons Learned

The four lessons from this case encompass both analytic tradecraft and the often challenging relationship between intelligence and policy—lessons that are perhaps all the more apt as US policymakers grapple with separatist issues, not only with Crimea and Ukraine, but also in Europe and around the globe.

- *Engaging with policymakers and understanding their priorities is key to ensuring that warning leads to action.*

This is an old issue manifest in the analytic debate between what are often called the Robert Gates and Sherman Kent models of analysis. The first counsels engagement with policy lest analysis be irrelevant; the latter counsels separation lest analysis be overly influenced by policy. In this case, if the NIE drafters had been better linked to policymakers, they might have crafted an analysis more closely tied to decisionmakers' interests, leading to more concrete action. According to former National Security Council Director for European Affairs Robert Hutchings, “It would have been a better estimate if done in closer communication with policymakers. If they had asked, ‘What are you thinking?’ This kind of interplay between the intelligence and policy communities is still timid, but more likely now than it was at the time.”⁵²

The Context: Yugoslavia Policy and the Bush Administration

NIE 15-90 was published when the world was in flux. Old threats were quickly disappearing and new ones emerging. The Soviet empire was crumbling and, while the Cold War construct still dominated much of policymaking, the strategic context was changing rapidly. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush called for a move “beyond containment” with the Soviet Union. Speaking to German citizens in Mainz that May, Bush captured the spirit of the times: “We seek self-determination for all of Germany and all of Eastern Europe.”⁵³ Self-determination, or at least waning Soviet influence, was forthcoming. In November 1989, six months after Bush’s call to “bring glasnost to East Berlin,” the Berlin Wall fell; by August 1990, the East and West German governments had signed the Unification Treaty.

The effects of Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies—*glasnost* and *perestroika*—spread across Eastern Europe like wildfire. After Gorbachev’s 1989 announcement that the Soviet Union would no longer intervene in the internal affairs of Eastern European states, communist regimes began to collapse. Revolutions—peaceful for the most part—swept Eastern Europe as the dominoes fell. By the summer of 1990, democratically elected governments had replaced communist regimes in Eastern Europe.⁵⁴

Events in the Middle East were unfolding rapidly, if not as peacefully. On 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded its tiny, oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. The aggression posed a threat to Western interests—securing access to the Persian Gulf—as well as to US partners in the Middle East. The months that followed witnessed an unprecedented global response. In a landmark shift toward East-West cooperation, the Soviet Union supported a United Nations Security Council resolution authorizing use of “all means necessary” to remove Iraq from Kuwait. The week after NIE 15-90 was published, President Bush approved Secretary of Defense Colin Powell’s appeal for a sweeping commitment of US forces to roll back Iraqi forces should sanctions fail.⁵⁵ By the end of the year, it was clear

that sanctions would fail; by February 1991, the Gulf War was unfolding at a dizzying pace.

The changing vista led the Bush administration to embrace a new phrase to describe the times: a “new world order,” one “where brutality will go unrewarded and aggression will meet collective resistance.” Critics pounced. Secretary of State James Baker later defended the expression, noting that it did not deny problems; rather, it meant that “the world was moving in the direction of the principles and values that we in the West had always held dear.”⁵⁶

Yugoslavia was one of the new-world problems. In the months before and after the NIE, the line from the White House remained consistent: Yugoslavia should stay together. In June 1991, Baker met in Belgrade with the leaders of the various republics and later warned of the consequences of a breakup. “Instability and breakup of Yugoslavia,” Baker stated, “could have some very tragic consequences not only here, but more broadly, in Europe as well.”⁵⁷ When asked directly about Slovenia’s planned declaration of independence, Baker replied, “I said that it would not be the policy of the United States to recognize that declaration, because we want to see this problem resolved through negotiation and through dialogue and not through preemptive unilateral actions.”⁵⁸ Baker was heavily criticized in the US press for suggesting the country should remain intact even if its citizens objected.

Congress was less concerned about keeping Yugoslavia together than with punishing Serbia for its treatment of the Albanians in Kosovo. Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) led much of the charge in the 101st Congress. Dole and his colleagues recognized “there is serious question whether Yugoslavia, as a country, will long exist,”⁵⁹ but it was the human rights record against Albanians in Kosovo that inflamed their imagination, not the tragedy that would unfold should the country collapse.

Competing demands for policymakers' attention were partially responsible for inaction on the Yugoslavia NIE. Often, the risk is that distracted policymakers will not notice or register a particular warning. In this case, the NIE did gain policymakers' attention. However, decisionmakers had their hands full. Preoccupied with two major imperatives—preparing for war in the Persian Gulf and keeping the Soviet Union together—policymakers could only devote attention to so many crises. For many, the Gulf War was utterly consuming. Some recalled the period as exhausting; one interviewee looked as though just remembering the ordeal made him tired. Others viewed it as exhilarating—the “high” of war. The Gulf War was the first war of the “new world order,” an unprecedented undertaking for many of the senior decisionmakers. Then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney recalled:

To say that we were tired and worn out...I guess I would quarrel with that interpretation. As I say, I look back on that period, I think it was an active period. I think there was a lot of stuff going on. I would take exception to the notion somehow we were tired. The administration had problems, but they didn't really lie in the national security, foreign policy area.⁶⁰

The State Department's director of policy planning, Dennis Ross, described the first Iraq war as an “intense emotional experience,” compounded by the events surrounding the end of the Cold War, in particular Germany's reunification. After a series of profound experiences, it became hard to refocus. “It's hard to grab onto another issue because no other issue seems to have that kind of command. It's not compelling,” Ross said. “[Baker] got riveted on the Middle East at that point.”⁶¹

For Ross, Baker's focus on other issues had troubling implications for the crisis unfolding in Yugoslavia:

I did get interested at this point in Yugoslavia because Slovenia was about to declare independence. It was pretty clear it was going to...

set in motion a train of events that was likely to be quite violent. . . . I had people on my staff who got me interested in it, because they wrote a couple of memos that were quite compelling. It was very hard to get Baker interested in that.⁶²

James Dobbins, the State Department's acting assistant secretary for European affairs at the time, suggested that the ample lead time of the Yugoslavia warning contributed to the problem. With other compelling events unfolding in the summer and fall of 1990, even a crisis viewed as certain to happen, but that was still a year away, was unlikely to be a top priority. He recalls that under the circumstances, “We would not have done more than look at the NIE and say, ‘Yes, that's a problem we'll have to deal with later.’”⁶³

Even if policymakers wanted to focus on Yugoslavia, their other policy imperatives left little room to maneuver. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Europe. When dismissive responses to the diplomatic warning cables sent to European capitals returned in the summer of 1990, National Security Council staffers found themselves constrained. The Europeans urged them to hold off on action, at least until after the Serbian elections in December of 1990. Robert Hutchings said, “With the senior levels of the US administration preoccupied with Iraq and unwilling to press matters on Yugoslavia, we reluctantly agreed to wait. It was a mistake.”⁶⁴

From the NIC, Van Heuven saw the same dynamic:

The broad policy setting was two major concerns—keeping the USSR together and preparing for Desert Storm. At the time, the expectation was that we could keep the show on the road. Along came the NIE, saying Yugoslavia was going to come apart—it didn't sit well.⁶⁵

Yugoslavia offered little but unpleasant prospects in a country of receding importance. Van Heuven noted, “No one was interested anymore. Yugoslavia lost its standing and its self-regard.”⁶⁶ Former communist countries like Poland and Hungary were surg-

ing ahead in reforms and democratization, without the sores of nationalist tensions or human rights abuses that continued to fester in Kosovo. As one analyst close to the NIE drafting process observed, “The United States simply stopped caring about Yugoslavia. If Yugoslavia had fallen apart without bloodshed, we would have seen no US interest at all. It is only atrocities that catch our attention.”⁶⁷

- *Policymakers who are substantive experts may be especially resistant to warning.*

Several key policymakers were deeply familiar with Yugoslavia, its languages, peoples, and history. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger in particular were “Yugoslav hands.” Yet familiarity created blind spots and may have contributed to a reluctance to believe that the Yugoslavia solution was dead. As Van Heuven noted, “Everyone who worked the Yugoslavia beat was deeply committed to one view or another, weaned on the idea that Yugoslavia would stay together.”⁶⁸ Reluctance to believe the Yugoslav solution was over, and deeply divided opinions over what to do, may have made it difficult for experienced Yugoslav hands to see that the former precedent—Yugoslavia had always muddled through—and the administration’s preference—Yugoslavia was a neat solution to divisive nationalism—no longer matched conditions on the ground.

Former CIA Deputy Director for European Analysis John Gannon underscored the gap between the administration’s view and the NIE’s judgments:

*The estimate was correct, but it was issued at a time when the administration had a different view; policymakers believed it was not in the United States’ interests to develop a policy based on the breakup of Yugoslavia, which was an outcome they did not want to occur.*⁶⁹

Often, when a disconnect between personally held beliefs and reality exists, individuals become selective consumers of information, avoiding sources of information or opinions that clash with their

preferred view. They may be reluctant to take any decisive action, fearing that doing so would make a situation worse.⁷⁰ This offers one explanation why policymakers seemed to cling to the status quo policy of Yugoslav unity. As Cheney recalled,

*Our immediate gut reaction was, my god, we can’t have Yugoslavia come apart. We can’t possibly get into a position where we allow Yugoslavia to be dismembered and these entities that are spinning off to become free and independent states. I think that was a mistake.*⁷¹

Gompert disputed the notion that policymakers were selective listeners, arguing that there were steady streams of both intelligence and diplomatic reporting, with Ambassador Zimmerman as a formidable correspondent in Yugoslavia. If true, this suggests a different downside to familiarity—the policymakers may have known too much. As then Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates explained,

*I believe the caution of the Bush administration in getting involved in Yugoslavia, again is based in no small part on individuals. You had three people in the administration who were very familiar with Yugoslavia and the history of the south Slavs. Eagleburger had been ambassador to Yugoslavia, Scowcroft had been Air Force attaché in Belgrade, and I had done all of my Master’s work on Eastern Europe and especially the south Slavs and all three of us had studied Serbo-Croatian. . . . We saw the historical roots of this conflict and the near nonexistent potential for solving it, for us fixing it.*⁷²

The fact that Eagleburger and Scowcroft were experts on the area made their pessimism all the more influential. As Dobbins noted, “If they had not been as experienced, their opinions would not have carried as much weight.”⁷³

- *The likelihood that policymakers will take action based on intelligence warnings increases when such analyses include opportunities.*

Although the Yugoslavia NIE made clear and hard-hitting judgments, it did not include any opportunities for the United States to influence the outcome. The NIE's lack of opportunity analysis exploring the range of policy options in Yugoslavia might have stymied policymaker action. As one senior official put it, decisionmakers felt helpless. Some said they did not believe they could do anything about the situation, and the NIE implied there was nothing to be done, even pouring cold water on one potentially hopeful initiative, economic reform.

Many in government who were watching Yugoslavia saw the situation as intractable. For Gompert, "The NIE basically confirmed what I already knew. Nor did it tell me what I needed to know . . . some course of action the consequences of which would not be horrible."⁷⁴

Here, where the NIE might have been the most useful, it offered the least. An NIE that offered something positive to take into the situation room could have been more useful. The State Department's acting assistant secretary for European affairs, James Dobbins, noted that it would have been helpful for the NIE to show "pressure points" and areas for potential engagement. Otherwise, "You might as well send it straight to the outbox."⁷⁵

As one policymaker put it:

The focus on preventing intelligence analysis from contamination by policy preferences can result in insufficient regard to what policymakers care about or need to hear. . . . There should have been an additional analytical thrust. The first step was to get people to accept the [key judgments] that the US couldn't keep Humpty Dumpty together any longer. This was a hard enough sell, but might have been easier if followed by a second step. . . . First, say Yu-

*goslavia is going to fall apart. Second, present some scenarios for managing dissolution.*⁷⁶

The counterargument, in this case, is that adding opportunity analysis might have pushed an already "indigestible" estimate to the breaking point. According to Van Heuven, "If we had tried, we probably wouldn't have had a unanimous estimate. We probably would have destroyed the estimate by overloading it with issues beyond the horizon at that point."⁷⁷ And the writers of the NIE were defensive about the reaction from policymakers that they "couldn't do anything with that estimate." For Van Heuven, "That was unfair, a shot across the bow. It wasn't the function of the estimate to apply a yardstick to what policy the administration should adopt."⁷⁸

In addition to feeling that there was nothing the United States could do to prevent the breakup of Yugoslavia, there were several reasons policymakers felt there was nothing they *should* do. First was the widespread view that this was a European problem for Europe to handle. This impression came about primarily because the Europeans themselves had communicated that they considered the Balkans to be their problem.⁷⁹ The European Community saw its moment in the sun dawning with German reunification and democratization sweeping Eastern Europe. Yet it was slow to recognize the skies turning dark over Yugoslavia. Ultimately, the European community failed to handle the crisis for political reasons. Van Heuven faulted a lack of consensus on the fact that, "There was no coherent European policy, nor was there an attempt by anyone to lead the Western community to a common point of view."⁸⁰

Nonetheless, this widespread belief is puzzling in light of the NIE's judgment that the Europeans would not act to prevent the breakup. Looking back, Van Heuven saw this judgment as one of the greatest missed opportunities in the NIE. Although it accurately assessed European reluctance to keep Yugoslavia together, the NIE missed the chance to project European responses to a breakup. "While an attempt to do so would have been a stretch," Van

Heuven reflected, “a policy world willing to absorb this message might have been better served.”⁸¹ Had the NIE concluded that allies might fail, “it would have been clearer to the policy community that, to use the metaphor of Baker, the United States would have a dog in this fight.”⁸²

Yet it is doubtful that such a message would have resonated; as it was, the desire to make this a European problem was pervasive. Hutchings recalled that, “Some people didn’t accept the [key judgment] on European non-responsiveness.”⁸³ There were neither resources nor will for the United States to be the primary lead after the Gulf War. One senior official stated, “We were tired after Kuwait and the Europeans gave us a good excuse not to get involved.”⁸⁴

The sense that there was nothing the United States ought to do was strong at the Cabinet level. Among others, Cheney was adamant that the Yugoslavia crisis, although tragic, did not rise to the threshold of strategic interest to prompt any US commitment of force:

*It was my judgment at the time, and frankly still is today, that this was not a strategically vital part of the world for the United States to put at risk or to pay the price that would be involved for us to go in and intervene militarily in that conflict.*⁸⁵

- *Policymakers read intelligence reports in the context of popular concepts.*

Yugoslavia’s collapse was seen by policymakers through a Cold War lens, one that distorted more than it clarified.⁸⁶ When viewed through such a prism, self-determination—which played a powerful but pernicious role in determining the future of Yugoslavia—became a realistic rather than an idealistic concept. After World War I, President Woodrow Wilson embraced the concept of self-determination, famously saying, “Self-determination is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril.” Wilson himself came to rue the implications

of the promises enshrined in the League of Nations Covenant. His secretary of state, Robert Lansing, took an even dimmer view, calling it a phrase “simply loaded with dynamite,” and concluding, “What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered!”⁸⁷

As the Cold War thawed, so did the demands for self-determination that had remained frozen under superpower strategic interests for decades. Hutchings traced the origins of the concept, noting,

*When successive US administrations said “self-determination,” they really meant “independence” or “liberation” from Soviet domination of countries in Central and Eastern Europe whose existence we already recognized. But these terms like “captive nations” and “rollback” sounded too provocative and retrograde so we invoked the more high-sounding principle of self-determination—imbuing it with a status that we would have reason to regret.*⁸⁸

Coming on the heels of German reunification, Germans were especially tempted by self-determination. There was strong public support for the Slovenes and Croats, especially among East Germans who had so recently yearned for—and attained—their freedom in the name of self-determination. Then German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher’s personal sympathies lay with the Slovene and Croat causes as well, explaining the German move to recognize their independence in December 1991. This move put the United States in a difficult position, as Gates recalled:

*[I]t was our view that Germany’s recognition of Croatia turned an internal problem into an international problem before the international community was prepared to deal with it. There was a lot of resentment against the Germans for that.*⁸⁹

Reflections

The context for the Yugoslavia NIE was not only an unusual rush of events—from the Gulf War to the fall of the Soviet Union—but that one geopolitical era was ending and another had not quite yet begun. The last nail in Yugoslavia’s coffin was the view, widespread on both sides of the Atlantic, that with the Soviet threat declining, Yugoslavia did not matter nearly as much as it had during the Cold War.^a The ensuing disintegration of artificial constructs was not surprising, but people were surprised nonetheless.

To be moved to action on Yugoslavia, policy officials would have had to be convinced not only

a. During the Cold War neither the Soviet Union nor the United States would have permitted such an eventuality. One or the other or both might well have intervened militarily to forestall the other. Yugoslavia was thus held together not just by Tito’s leadership, but by countervailing East-West pressures. With the end of the Cold War, neither side cared about Yugoslavia’s future alignment.

that the country would collapse, but that there was something within reach they could do to prevent it—a tall order for any intelligence assessment. On that score, the estimate was unhelpful. Some policy officials at the senior working level convinced themselves that US interests justified very active steps to prevent disintegration, but they could not convince their superiors, who wanted no part of it. Five years later, when the United States was moved to intervene in Bosnia later after the horror of ethnic cleansing, the interests at stake were not containing the Soviet empire, but rather were a combination of ideals, allies, and the future of NATO.

The Cold War lens served the United States and its allies well in preparing for some developments, such as the Eastern European revolutions and German reunification, but not for others, like Yugoslavia.⁸⁹ As one senior policymaker noted, “[By] applying yesterday’s strategic logic to tomorrow’s problems—flawed policies ensued”⁹¹—a provocative reflection in today’s messy strategic landscape.



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