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The argument Clinton isn't making on Bosnia

Wolfowitz, Paul, Feith, Douglas J. *Wall Street Journal*. (Eastern edition). New York, N.Y.: Nov 28, 1995. pg. A14

Abstract (Summary)

Paul Wolfowitz and Douglas J. Feith say that President Clinton must define sensible goals for the use of US peacekeepers in Bosnia and provide guidance for how and when to get the troops out. Wolfowitz and Feith assert that public and congressional skepticism about troop deployment could be allayed if Clinton makes it clear that arming and training Bosnian Federation forces is not only the goal of US policy toward Bosnia but also the key to the "exit strategy" for the troops.

Full Text (971 words)

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Having committed an armored division of American "peacekeepers" for Bosnia with little analysis and even less consultation, the Clinton administration now contends that Congress has no responsible choice but to concur. To be sure, if it repudiates the president's troop commitment, Congress would be blamed for bringing about resumption of the war, a collapse of American leadership in NATO and perhaps of the alliance itself, and a dangerous perception around the world of the U.S. becoming isolationist and unreliable.

But even worse than not backing the president's commitment would be for Congress to approve uncritically a flawed policy that could fail disastrously. Congress has a duty to try to force the administration to define sensible goals for the mission. Americans remember Lebanon and Somalia, where we managed to lose both men and credibility. We remain dubious of the operation in Haiti, which may succeed in restoring dictatorship rather than democracy. If U.S. troops end their Bosnia mission without having achieved what they came to do, especially if they take significant casualties, the consequences will be graver by far.

The administration acknowledges the problem by stressing that U.S. troops will not be deployed unless there is a peace to enforce. But this rather sensible condition for getting in gives little guidance for how and when to get out.

There is one compelling rationale for U.S. participation in the international peacekeeping force: Bosnia has been the victim of international aggression and of crimes against humanity that the Bosnian Serbs, supported by the Milosevic regime in Belgrade, have committed against hundreds of thousands of predominantly Muslim Bosnians. The U.S. and our European allies and others bear a large measure of responsibility for these horrors because we have maintained an international arms embargo on Bosnia. The Bosnian government's troops have numerical superiority over their enemies, but, as a result of the embargo, they have remained inferior in equipment, especially heavy armor and artillery.

The goal of U.S. policy toward Bosnia should be Bosnian self-reliance. We should aim to make it possible for the Bosnian government to defend its own country militarily. Congress should oppose the deployment of U.S. forces to Bosnia unless the administration makes a clear and binding commitment to create, by arming and training Bosnian Federation forces, a qualitative military balance between Bosnian-Croatian and Serb forces in the former Yugoslavia.

If the peacekeeping force is conceived as a means of keeping Bosnia subject to unrealistic arms limitation schemes, and therefore doomed to remain a ward of NATO or the U.S., Congress should oppose it. But if peacekeepers are intended to deter aggression for the year or so needed for the Bosnian government to move toward self-reliance in the defense field, then the strategic and moral case for U.S. participation should be easier for Americans to credit.

Unfortunately, the Dayton Accords lack clear commitments to equip and train the Bosnian forces. Administration statements are disturbingly ambiguous on this point. U.S. officials say they have assured the Bosnians that federation forces will be equipped and trained, but that assurance itself is hedged by a misplaced faith that new arms control agreements might make it unnecessary. According to the accords, no weapons will be delivered for 90 days and no heavy weapons for 180 days, pending arms control talks. Also, U.S. statements make it clear that we will try to get

others to do the equipping and training. (It is not reassuring that we still lack a good estimate of Bosnian requirements, even though for three years the Clinton administration said that it aimed to lift the arms embargo.)

These limitations imply that moving quickly or openly to arm the Bosnians would be destabilizing, but the opposite is true. To ensure a stable Bosnia and to be able to withdraw our troops on schedule, we must be committed, publicly and resolutely, to a rapid equip-and-train program. (Defensive systems not covered by the envisioned arms control regime, such as anti-tank missiles and counter-battery radars, are needed with particular urgency, given the precarious position of Sarajevo.)

The administration's hesitations seem to reflect a belief that equipping and training federation forces would be inconsistent with a "neutral" role for American peacekeepers.

It is important, however, to see clearly the purpose of the peacekeeping force: It must uphold the peace agreement generally, but it is intended also to deter the Serbs from taking advantage of their current (temporary) advantage in armaments. It is not correct or constructive to talk of the peacekeepers as "neutral." They do not have to be neutral to perform their mission any more than police have to be neutral as between shopkeepers and robbers. In fact, pretending to be neutral when none of the parties so regards us actually increases the danger to U.S. forces at a tactical level, by making it more difficult for them to decide how to respond to provocations or ambiguous situations on the ground. It was this posture that helped produce the inadequate security precautions taken by U.S. Marines in Beirut. The best way to shore up the peace is through a policy that deters Serbian aggression and secures Bosnian compliance through American support and cooperation.

If the administration is to allay public and congressional skepticism about the troop deployment, it must make clear that arming and training Bosnian Federation forces is not only consistent with our role in the peacekeeping force, it is also the key to the "exit strategy" for our troops. If we are unable to help put the Bosnian government in a position to defend itself, the administration will find, when it wants to withdraw our forces after a year or so, that it cannot do so without triggering a catastrophe.

Mr. Wolfowitz served as undersecretary of defense in the Bush administration and Mr. Feith served as deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration.

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