OBSERVATIONS ON THE BOSNIAN ELECTIONS FROM PRIJEDOR, REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

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In late 1991, the tinder of pan-Serbian nationalism was already ablaze in the former Yugoslavia. The socialist Yugoslav state had already collapsed, politically and economically, into its federal components. Conflict between the new states had been fueled by the inflammatory rhetoric of nationalist politicians, particularly by Slobodan Milosevic, the ex-communist leader of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and most powerful leader in the region. In an effort to avoid Croat rule, Serbs in the Krajina region of Croatia bordering Bosnia and Herzegovina, had embarked on a brutal crusade of terror that foretold further regional conflict. Serb victories in Croatia were guaranteed by the assistance of the Serb dominated Yugoslav Peoples' Army. Ethnic violence in Croatia foretold larger regional conflict.

Immediately to the south of where much of this fighting occurred, across the Sava River separating Croatia from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbs in the Bosnian Krajina were emboldened by Serb military successes in Croatia and by Milosevic's calls for Serbs throughout the former Yugoslavia to unite in a "Greater Serbia." Amid the northwestern valleys and mountains of the Bosnia's Krajina sits Bosnia's second largest predominantly Serb city, called Prijedor (pronounced PREE-i-dor). Prijedor also lends its name to the surrounding region, home to numerous mostly Muslim and Croat towns. The region stretches from the Croatian border to the north and west, east to the largely Serb city of Banja Luka, and south to the Muslim-controlled hills. In late 1991, the population of Prijedor was 120,000—70,000 of whom were Serbs.

At the beginning of 1992, the hot embers of war blew across the Sava river into the Bosnian Krajina. Around that time, Bosnian Serb nationalists established a shadow government in Prijedor that began to undermine the legitimate multiethnic authorities in the region through harassment and intimidation. The new Serbian nationalist authorities forced the legitimate regional govern-

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ment to accept deployment throughout the area of thousands of Serb soldiers from the Yugoslav army who had served in battles for the Croatian Krajina. With the backing of these soldiers and their own paramilitary troops, Serb nationalists soon controlled all the major roads in northwestern Bosnia, as well as local police and security forces. On April 30, 1992, the legitimate regional leaders in Prijedor relinquished power after Serbian nationalists gave them an intentionally intimidating tour of destroyed non-Serb villages in Croatia. The Serbs immediately consolidated their power, dismissing non-Serbs from their jobs, confiscating weapons from non-Serbs, controlling or disrupting most means of communication (telephones, television, newspapers, radio), and restricting freedom of movement.

Less than a month later, the Serbs of Prijedor, encouraged and supported by the Yugoslav army, initiated a brutal and chillingly systematic campaign to force the non-Serb population out of the region, a practice that the world would soon know by the euphemism 'ethnic cleansing.' The Serbs ruthlessly leveled close to 50,000 Muslim and Croat houses, rounded up their inhabitants, killed community leaders, and forced males of fighting age (16, sometimes younger) into concentration camps to starve. Many of the men in the overcrowded camps were executed, sometimes after almost unimaginably vicious torture and sexual assault. The remainder of the non-Serb population was interned separately. Serbs raped thousands of women and girls in a deliberate

This map was included in the packet of materials distributed to election monitors by the OSCE.

pattern of violence, intimidation and cruelty. In response to these acts, tens of thousands of inhabitants fled Prijedor during the first few months of the war in Bosnia.

For most of the remainder of the war in Bosnia, the confrontation line between the Bosnian Serbs and the unstable alliance of Bosnian Muslims and Croats restlessly shifted far from Prijedor. In late 1995, however, the Muslim-Croat Army launched a successful offensive that pushed the war back to Prijedor's southern frontier. In November 1995, the Dayton peace agreement brought an end to this phase of Bosnia's violent history. Under the terms of the peace, Bosnia continued to exist as a single multiethnic state, but it was divided into two sub-state political entities which reflected the separation of Serb from non-Serb that had existed throughout the war. The Republika Srpska, as the Serb-controlled entity is known, comprises 49 percent of Bosnia, including the Prijedor region. The Muslim-Croat alliance, formally called the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, governs the remainder. The boundary between the two entities runs along much of the final confrontation line, including through the hills just to the south of Prijedor.

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The Dayton peace agreement also provided that Bosnia hold national and entity-level elections no later than September 14, 1996. After months of debate, the elections were scheduled for that date. All of Bosnia, as well as much of the international community, recognized that the success of the elections would be indicative of the immediate future of Bosnia and the peace process.

Thursday, September 12, 1996

After a rapid descent through dense low-lying cloud cover, the Italian C-130 makes an instrumentless landing at Banja Luka's one strip airport. Standing on the tarmac, I see Canadian troops loading three similar military transport planes. The Italians and Canadians are part of the 50,000-strong NATO-led multinational peace Implementation Force (IFOR) maintaining a military separation of the warring factions in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the terms of the Dayton peace agreement. I am part of a 1,000-person international observer team from several dozen countries assembled by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the September 14 elections. The OSCE has assigned 40 of us to observe voting in and around Prijedor.

IFOR has identified Prijedor as one of the three places in Bosnia where election day violence is most likely to occur. Respect for civil and political rights in the area remains as low as anywhere in Republika Srpska. As elec-

tion day approaches, the regional leaders culpable for many of the region's atrocities remain in power. Prijedor's *de facto* chief of police and Republika Srpska's vice-minister of internal affairs, Simo Drljaca, is said by human rights advocates to head an organized crime group and employ secret police units to intimidate, torture and kill those who oppose his policies. Drljaca was recently "reassigned" to a new position within the internal security apparatus in response to international pressure, but he is widely thought to remain in power. At least four individuals serving openly on his police force are indicted war criminals. Zeijko Raznjatovic, a FRY citizen better known as Arkan, commanded a paramilitary force in and around Prijedor throughout the war. His mercenaries are widely thought to have waged a particularly brutal (even by Balkan standards) terror campaign between 1992-1995. Arkan has now formed the ultranationalist Serb Unity Party, which will field a slate of candidates in the September 14th elections. A senior Bosnia expert for a leading U.S. human rights group recently named Drljaca and Arkan the people "most indictable" for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia.

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Staging multiethnic elections against this backdrop seems like an invitation for trouble. Seemingly reliable preelection day estimates suggest that about 100,000 displaced persons will return to the Republika Srpska on election day seeking to exercise the right to vote where they lived prior to the war, as provided by the Dayton peace agreement. A similar number of refugees may enter Bosnia on election day for the same reason from nearby countries in Europe. The Serbs of Prijedor are unlikely to welcome the return of their onetime neighbors. Non-Serbs returning for the first time since they were forced out during the war may arrive with vengeance in mind.

Armored IFOR vehicles escort the observers from the airport to the nearby base that functions as the British-commanded headquarters for one of IFOR's three divisions. It has begun to rain. IFOR troops motion their visitors to take shelter in the large abandoned steel factory within the base, where they offer tea. Before a series of briefings begins, a British colonel welcomes the group and volunteers some advice. "Observe carefully," he counsels. "Nothing is as it seems in Bosnia." In the first briefing, "Mine Awareness," we are instructed that "Bosnia is a mine-rich environment with an unexploded ordnance problem." To illustrate, the officer projects a map of Bosnia on a screen. Pink dots indicate the location of known mine fields. South and west of Prijedor, and along the rest of the former confrontation lines, the map is solid pink. "May I suggest you remain on hard standing," the briefer admonishes. To reinforce the message, IFOR troops escort their guests outside through the hard rain to a mine training field. A staff sergeant detonates two grams of explosive (a small fraction of the amount found in a real anti-personnel mine) inside a

combat boot. The boot disappears in the thunderous explosion. We head back inside the factory feeling "mine aware."

A Canadian IFOR officer briefs the group on election day security. Ordinary communication between observers and IFOR will prove impossible, he notes. The phones in rural Bosnia do not work. The OSCE has chosen not to equip us with two-way radios, arguing that they are expensive and ineffective in Bosnia's mountainous terrain. The officer informs us of IFOR's intention to patrol the roads between various hot spots. The description sounds more medical than military. We are equipped with a neon orange piece of paper, described as an "emergency communication device." When in trouble, we are to wave it at any passing IFOR vehicle to obtain assistance. Observers whisper to each other, not comforted by the arrangements in light of the predictions of election day violence. Prior to our departure, IFOR serves chicken noodle soup and provides copies of 15 different military maps of the Prijedor region.

By mid-afternoon, we arrive at our destination and establish a base at the Hotel Prijedor, a 10-story glass structure from the 1970s. It is about twice as tall as any surrounding building and the only vaguely modern hotel in town. It seems more than adequate. Contrary to expectations, the rooms have hot running water. The radiators are off, however, and the temperature in the room is already down to 60 degrees.

A small church sits across the road. Painted yellow and trimmed with white stone, the well-maintained building stands out as Prijedor's most attractive architectural landmark. With seating for a mere 300 persons, it is Prijedor's only Christian place of worship. The parish priest, Father Tomislav Matanovic, was arrested and detained by the local police on August 24, 1995. The police subsequently placed Father Matanovic under house arrest at his parents' home. On September 19, 1995, the police moved the priest and his parents to the local police station. The three have not been heard from since.

Later in the afternoon, the OSCE regional coordinator, a German named Hans who has been in the region for only two weeks, groups the observers in pairs. I am matched with Beth Boburg, the only other American in the group. Beth works in the human rights bureau of the U.S. State Department. Hans distributes our uniforms: T-shirts and baseball hats on which are printed a black, blue and orange tree. Hans explains: "Students in Sarajevo created this design. It represents the tree of democracy, with leaves that look like eyes. They are watching." They are ugly. Beth asks me quietly if we have to wear them. Others share the same thought. Beth and I meet the rest of our four-person team, Danijel and Rade. Both are 22-year-old Serbs, soft spoken and polite. Danijel, our interpreter, seems delighted to learn we are Americans. He wants to know whether we have seen the summer blockbuster film, *The Rock*. He asks us how we arrived in Bosnia. Danijel tells us he and Rade know all about the "Charlie-130." Until recently, the two friends were in the same Bosnian Serb Army anti-aircraft unit. Each day, they would climb to the top of a high mountain ridge with a Stinger-style surface-to-air missile, Danijel explains, to watch for Croatian, Muslim or NATO planes. Danijel assures us

quickly that in three years he never fired his weapon. He says firing on a NATO plane would have been suicidal. "Not even for practice did I fire it," he continues. "It was too expensive."

Rade grew up 15 miles away in the predominantly Muslim neighboring town of Sanski Most. The Bosnian Serbs captured Sanski Most in 1992, but it was recaptured by the Bosnian-Croat Federation Army in the final months of the war in late 1995. Rade and his family, along with 10,000 other Serbs, fled to Prijedor. Rade takes great pride in his 1987 Volkswagen Golf, which he purchased after leaving Sanski Most. Rade explains the car was a good deal because it came from Sarajevo. The car no longer carries Sarajevo plates, which during the war would have invited attack in these parts. Many Muslims driving Sarajevo-registered vehicles in Serb territory during the war were stopped and killed. I don't ask about the circumstances under which the original owner gave up possession. We end the evening with dinner at a modest restaurant called the Aerodrome. Danijel orders the food at my request. He selects a Serbian specialty—tenderized veal, rolled like a burrito, stuffed with cream cheese and deep fried. Simo Drljaca, Danijel explains, owns the restaurant.

Friday, September 13, 1996

Beth and I volunteer to monitor eight polling stations southwest of Prijedor, all of which lie within the demilitarized Zone of Separation (ZoS) that runs along the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL) separating Republika Srpska from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We plan to visit the polling stations over the course of the day. Reaching most of our polling stations requires travel on minor dirt roads. A quick review of the IFOR mine-awareness map confirms that the entire area is solid pink. Apart from the main road running past two of the sites, IFOR has not identified any road in the area as mine-free and passable. For most of election day, moreover, we will be several miles from the nearest IFOR vehicle since patrols will be confined largely to the main roads between the hot spots. IFOR's advice to remain on hard standing and patrolled roads proves inconsistent with the observer mission.

The closest town to our eight polling stations lies several miles north of the ZoS. Bosanski Novi, recently renamed Novigrad by Serbs who thought the old name "too Muslim," was an ethnically mixed town of 42,000 before the war. To avoid confusion and conflict, everyone calls the town Novi. Approximately 14,000 Muslims were driven out of Novi between 1992-1995. Novi is polluted by political posters with color portraits of the various candidates, paid for by the OSCE, which gave money for election posters and other political activities to all political parties meeting a minimum standard of support. All of the posters seem to advertise for Serb nationalist parties, with the greatest number promoting the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), the ruling party in Republika Srpska, until recently headed by indicted war criminal Radovan Karadzic. Danijel tells me that the party faithful have torn down or papered over advertisements for more moderate candidates. Many posters champion ultra-nationalist parties urging full integration with Serbia, such as those of

the paramilitary leader Arkan. The Bosnian Serbs with whom I speak predict Arkan's party will receive few votes. They say he used his wartime power for personal profit and terrorized them almost as much as he did the Muslims. As the candidates put forward by Arkan's party have not been indicted for war crimes, they managed to qualify for international funding.

A number of posters of Radovan Karadzic, referred to as Dr. K by OSCE personnel in public to avoid attracting attention, appear in shop windows as well. That is in open violation of election rules forbidding political images of indicted war criminals. I take several photos, sheltering my camera in my coat to keep it from the steady rain. Simo Drljaca's police officers, dressed in blue army camouflage uniforms, beckon me toward them. I approach and present my OSCE identification with a forced smile. The police officers wave me away in dour silence. International media reports indicate that Republika Srpska authorities have instructed their security forces not to interfere with the elections. I take this incident as confirmation. I retreat to Café Dayton, a trendy hangout among international types which, apart from its new name, seems an otherwise unremarkable and Spartan bar.

Rade and Danijel are unfamiliar with the roads to the rural villages we must visit. Rade follows his instincts and trails behind others who know the areas near the confrontation lines. The rough dirt roads rise and fall with the lines of the smooth dark clay hills. Small, black, conic haystacks dot fields of overgrown kelly-green clover. Nestled beside them are modest red brick farm houses, largely untouched by the war. Historically, Serbs farmed this land, and they controlled it throughout the war. The IEBL lies just two miles down the road. The haystacks have blackened from age, Danijel explains, because these farmers, not rich to start with, slaughtered their livestock for food or money during the war. Some haystacks were unused for months because residents fled to escape the advancing Bosnian-Croat Federation Army, while other haystacks lie in mined fields. Forty minutes off the main road, Rade recognizes the landscape. He and Danijel were stationed here in 1995. They show us the house in which they slept with their unit in the closing days of the war. Those were not happy times, Rade says. He seems distressed to have returned.

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We leave the car near three houses that Rade identifies as the heart of the tiny village called Dren. We walk along a horse path for five minutes to the local polling station on a nearby farm. The farming family appears very pleased to have company at their modest house. Several middle-aged women smile from the porch. An elderly man identifies himself as the father of the local election official. He offers coffee and *slivovic*, homemade plum brandy. The man asks whether we are affiliated with IFOR, which he believes is supervising the

elections. His hands carry dark stains from the inky fuzz of fresh walnuts. The son arrives. He explains that 200 Serbs are expected to vote at his home. They will travel by horse or foot from miles away, he adds. The signs provided by the OSCE to direct voters to the polling station from the main road hang on the living room wall indicating the desired flow around the room. The signs are not needed outside, the son says with pride, for everyone in the area knows the elections are at his house. The official and his father fill the pockets of their departing visitors with fresh walnuts.

Local Serb election officials have designated one of our eight polling sites, in the small village of Blatna, as a recommended polling station for displaced persons crossing the IEBL from the Federation. In an attempt to minimize trouble, IFOR has designated a number of the major roads throughout Bosnia as preferred routes for those traveling to cast their ballots. IFOR intends to patrol these roads with what it describes as a robust force. IFOR will also escort vehicles crossing the IEBL with eight or more voters to a recommended polling site. Others may travel on the preferred routes or other roads at their own risk. Blatna lies on one of the two preferred routes in the Prijedor region. Local officials estimate that around 4,000 voters from the Federation will travel to Blatna, with another 6,000 traveling past on the preferred route to another recommended site in Prijedor. Almost all of these voters are expected to be Muslims evicted from their homes during the war.

The schoolhouse in Blatna that will function as the polling station suffered considerable damage during the war. Its outer walls are riddled with bullet marks. Its glassless windows, some with jagged remnants of the original pane, have been covered with thick plastic. Just a few buildings away in easy view from the school hangs an enormous Mao-style painting of Dr. K. Inside the school, more bullet marks scar the walls. Faded, but unmistakable, blood stains one wall. Burnt crimson hand prints, shoulder width apart, streak dramatically toward the floor from about chest height. An OSCE supervisor whispers that the polling station chairman ordered a hasty cleanup of the blood-coated cement floor a mere three days ago. The polling station chairman appears agitated to have international visitors. The relatively large size of the polling station and its distance from the main road, the supervisor observes, will make voter security a challenge. During the drive back to Prijedor, I consider the bloodstained polling station and how Muslims will react to having to vote in such a place.

Saturday, September 14, 1996
Election Day

Awake at 4:15 A.M. after a cold night, we set off immediately (*sans* T-shirts and hats) to reach as many polling stations as possible before they open at 7 A.M. The rain has subsided, but a clammy fog envelopes the dark landscape. Even Rade drives slowly. On the road to Novi we pass several IFOR columns, making good on the promise to display robust force. The wide tanks force us from the road as they pass.

As the day breaks and voting begins, all signs point toward a quiet day of orderly voting in the predominantly Serb villages. People file around the polling station rooms in precisely the manner dictated by the election rules—showing identification, marking ballots and placing them in sealed OSCE-distributed ballot boxes. Officials send away some individuals who do not appear on the registration list. Voting occurs in secrecy behind folded cardboard screens provided by the OSCE. Local police and security forces stand outside the polling stations in reasonable numbers for security. Representatives of the competing political parties quietly observe the voting to assure the impartiality of the vote. In general, community election officials make efforts to remain impartial. They seek and accept advice about election rule technicalities from OSCE election supervisors and observers. The population, for the most part, honors the rules barring alcohol. No political posters appear within sight of a polling station, except for paintings of Dr. K, which locals regard as permanent monuments, and no campaigning seems to occur.

Danijel thinks that for the villagers the election is the most interesting thing that has happened since the end of the fighting.

Some irregularities are visible, of course. Most importantly, about 5 percent to 10 percent of the longtime residents of each village we visit do not appear on the final OSCE produced voter registration list. The OSCE has allowed a massive computer data error to pass unchecked. Affected individuals cannot vote without obtaining a special form in Novi. Traveling to Novi proves impracticable for most rural villagers, who quietly and powerlessly accept disenfranchisement. In addition, about half the rural population remains illiterate or cannot afford needed eye glasses. Therefore, they cannot mark their ballots in secrecy as the rules require.

More distressingly, however, the circumstances seem ripe for fraud. There are weaknesses in the OSCE's system for ensuring that only those who are registered vote, and that they do so only once. Serbs from Yugoslavia and refugees from the Krajina region of Croatia who lack Bosnian citizenship may seek to vote illicitly on behalf of refugees, displaced persons, the missing and the infirm. They need only arrive with "two reputable individuals" willing to confirm their identity. All those who vote have their right index finger marked with semi-permanent invisible ink that can be checked with a black light. "If the dead vote, they will do so only once," an OSCE elections adviser concedes. A single polling station worker at the door to each polling station checks whether those who present themselves have been inked. Another individual checks their identification papers. Dishonesty on the part of either worker could result in double voting or voting under a false identity. The probability of fraud seems enhanced by the OSCE having allowed Republika Srpska authorities to appoint their nationalist cronies to every position on each local election commission and polling station committee. The ratio of international

observer teams to polling stations (one to eight) and the former's general unfamiliarity with the local language inspires only modest confidence in the observer mission.

In Dren, deep within the ZoS, the entire Serb village has turned out by 10 A.M., giving the place the feel of a country fair. Danijel thinks that for the villagers the election is the most interesting thing that has happened since the end of the fighting. The villagers ask when IFOR troops will arrive, eager to see the impressive force for the first time. I decide not to ruin the excitement by revealing that Dren is neither a hot spot nor on a preferred route. The local official explains why no political party officials are present near the polling station. "The entire village supports the ruling SDS party," he explains. "All the families have agreed." An unscientific sampling shows complete support for the SDS. No Muslims or Croats vote in Dren. None live there now.

At the Blatna schoolhouse, two IFOR armored vehicles have lodged themselves in a corn field 100 yards away. A Czech platoon stands nearby. Two dozen uniformed police from Simo Drljaca's security forces mill about. Ten young men, most likely plainclothes Serb police, chat with their uniformed comrades. A few local Serb civilians stop to hear the news. As of 11:30 A.M., no Muslims or Croats have arrived to vote, but soon passing international police monitors say that buses from the Federation are on their way. Everyone waits.

Around 2 P.M., two buses arrive at high speed, escorted by two IFOR jeeps. Four-wheel drive vehicles from the international police monitors, local police, the U.N. refugee agency and a leading U.S. human rights group follow in a convoy. News crews from Independent Television News (U.K.) and the SDS-controlled Republika Srpska television also arrive. A mere 53 frightened but brave voters disembark. The older ones wear traditional Muslim berets or head scarves. The voters head toward the schoolhouse at the urging of election officials, followed closely by their international escorts. Inside the polling station the Muslims receive the same treatment as Serb voters. The first few vote without incident. A middle-aged Muslim man is unable to read the small print on the ballots. He casually asks a Serb polling station committee member to lend his eyeglasses. The Serb removes his eyeglasses immediately and hands them over with a genuine smile. The Muslim votes and returns the glasses with an appreciative grin. The interaction between the men belies the intractable ethnic hatred purportedly at the heart of the armed conflict. Moments later, a few Muslim voters standing at the identification desk start shouting. Errors in the OSCE voter list have forced the polling station chairman to bar seven Muslims from voting in Blatna. These voters accuse the Serb chairman of manipulating the list. The two groups call each other names. International supervisors and observers are unable to convince the voters that the Serbs are not to blame. In the commotion, no one seems to notice the bloody, bullet-ridden walls.

In interviews at the exit of the schoolhouse, the passengers confirm they are Muslims who used to live in Novi. Those who voted feel the process inside was technically fair. Those who could not vote remain bitter. None of the

Muslims have any intention of returning to their former homes. They desired only to see for themselves that the fighting had really stopped. They do not intend for their voyage to be interpreted as a political statement against Serb control of the area. The Muslims exit the building and once again become visibly nervous. Without any trace of emotion, a Serb policeman suggests to the group that they should return to the buses for their own safety. The voters seem to agree and they pass through the Serb crowd without incident, re-boarding the buses. Moments later the vehicles speed away with their IFOR escorts and international convoy. Once again, everyone waits. Hours pass, and no cars or other buses from the Federation appear.

At 4:30 P.M., I am standing at the IEBL, having spent 10 minutes convincing Danijel and Rade that it is safe to drive the one mile from Blatna. The border is marked only by a six-foot tall, orange IFOR surveyor's post. International police monitors are parked at the post, flanked by Republika Srpska and Federation police just out of earshot of each other. The international police state that they have heard on the radio that no more buses will cross the IEBL at Blatna today for lack of voter interest. They also report that the Muslim-controlled radio station in the Federation has broadcast erroneous reports about Serb crowds blocking the road to Blatna. When asked whether voters have come in private cars, the international police note that they have turned away about a dozen private cars. I ask on what authority. All three police forces at the border confirm that their superiors instructed them to deny passage to cars. So much for freedom of movement on election day. Late in the evening, we accompany the ballot boxes to the regional ballot counting center in Novi, where they will remain under guard until the conclusion of the count. Regional election officials meticulously check the paperwork of each polling station chairman for accuracy. Rade returns us to the Hotel Prijedor around midnight.

Police forces at the border confirm that their superiors instructed them to deny passage to cars. So much for freedom of movement on election day.

Sunday, September 15, 1996

By 1 P.M., Hans has concluded the post-election debriefing of the 40 observers in the Prijedor region. A consensus has emerged about voting in this area. Few major irregularities have occurred. Errors in the OSCE final voters list represented the major problem. Very few voters crossed the IEBL to vote in this region. These findings echo international news media reports heard on the satellite television in the hotel bar after the meeting. The news reports confirm my fears about some level of voting fraud. They predict the turnout exceeded 100 percent of eligible voters. A number of observers discuss the

significant restrictions on freedom of movement, expression and association in the period leading up to election day. My part in the observer mission is over. Beth will stay another week to observe the count. Danijel and Rade are waiting for me in the lobby of the hotel as planned. We intend to spend the rest of the day in search of the history of the war.

To the north of Prijedor's old city center lies a high mountain ridge famous for its role in World War II. The locals call it the Kozara (pronounced KOZ-uhra). Throughout that war, partisans (mostly Serb) fought from bases on the Kozara against the pro-Axis Croatian *Ustashe* ("Insurrectionists") puppet government installed by the Nazis. Rade's Volkswagen makes slow progress on the steep road to the crest of the ridge. As we ascend, Danijel reminds me that far more Serbs died during World War II at the hands of Croats and Muslims than at the hands of Germans. Twenty minutes later we leave the car to climb several hundred concrete steps to the top of the mountain. Two vertical tracks, about eight feet apart, mark where the steps have crumbled under an enormous weight. Heavy artillery, hauled by tanks perhaps, seems the most likely culprit.

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At the top of the Kozara is an open field with a clear view of Prijedor and Muslim-held mountains farther to the South. At the center of the clearing stands a 100-foot concrete tower. Around it sit a dozen cement stele engraved with Slavic names. Danijel explains it is a monument built in Tito's time to partisans from the Prijedor area who died fighting fascism. Danijel says he learned in school that 700,000 Serbs perished during World War II. (In his book *Balkan Ghosts*, Robert Kaplan recounts how Croatian nationalists describe the number as less than 60,000, and that neither the Croat nor Serb figures withstand close scrutiny.) Danijel expresses the frequently heard sentiment in Republika Srpska that the West has abandoned its old Serb allies in favor of Muslims and Croats who fought with Hitler. On the way down the Kozara, just below where we find the car, Rade drives past a Serb Army checkpoint on an intersecting road heading back up the mountain. A communications tower pierces the forested skyline behind armed guards at a barrier. It was here that Serb forces first seized control of Prijedor by blocking transmission of non-Serb radio and television broadcasts.

At the base of the Kozara, a large village lies in complete ruins. The charred remains of several thousand homes serve as the only visible reminder of a Muslim town called Kozarac (pronounced KOZ-uhratz). The destruction of Kozarac, in its completeness, resembles photos taken in Nagasaki the day after the atomic blast. The history of Kozarac's destruction and the fate of the 27,000 inhabitants in the affected area has been well documented by U.N. experts and journalists through hundreds of independent interviews with survivors. Prior to mid-May 1992, the residents of Kozarac had heard the back-

ground rumble of interethnic violence increase to a nerve-racking buzz. In separate, isolated incidents, Serb paramilitary groups attacked a number of town leaders and their families, often raping the women and beating the men, sometimes killing them in the process. Despite the brutality of the Serb terror campaign, most residents of Kozarac could not have been prepared for the evil that was to come.

On May 24, 1992, the Serbs began the most unimaginably violent portion of their systematic effort to obtain absolute control over northwestern Bosnia. Heavily armed Bosnian Serbs, assisted by members of the Yugoslav People's Army, mercilessly shelled civilian houses in Kozarac and nearby smaller villages for more than 24 hours from nearby positions on the main road between Prijedor and Banja Luka. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, perished in the shelling. Serb infantry then stormed the town, overrunning it easily. Going house to house the soldiers forced the town's inhabitants into the streets. Some inhabitants were lined up and gunned down. Mostly, the Serbs separated men of fighting age from others. The women and children were taken away at gunpoint. Some men were forced to kneel and the Serbs slit their throats. Others were herded into holding areas to await future ill treatment.

I ask Rade to stop the car as we pass the crumbling frame of the town's main mosque. Across the road lies a small Muslim cemetery overgrown by tall grasses that have already dislodged a number of simple gravestones. Serb refugees occupy a few seemingly uninhabitable structures nearby. These refugees arrived from Croatia in late 1995 fleeing the advancing Croatian Army as it recaptured the Croatian Krajina from Serb paramilitary forces during the former's highly effective "Operation Storm." A young boy of about seven and his mother, dressed in tattered clothes, approach. Seeing my camera by my side, the mother asks whether I will take a photo of her son. He has never had his photo taken. I oblige, recording them next to the SDS graffiti on the fire-stained walls of a former Muslim house they now occupy. Painted circles with an X in the center, one foot in diameter, mark the exterior shells of all the ruins in sight. Danijel explains that the symbol was applied during the battle by Serbs to signify that a house had been conquered. Symmetrical crosses with four capital Cs (the Cyrillic letter 's') appear on a number of the walls. This is the Serbian nationalist icon for the slogan, "Only unity can save the Serbs." We move on in silence.

Near the center of the old town, Rade stops at the only undamaged building in sight. Its a large house. A café occupies the first floor. Visibly poor people loiter inside without food or drink—more Serb refugees from the Croatian Krajina. Danijel explain this is the house and café of Dusan Tadic, the indicted war criminal on trial in the Hague for alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international law. In this utterly destroyed place, the lone standing house reaffirms my perception of the credibility of the evidence against Tadic. I discuss the assault on Kozarac with my companions. Danijel explains that the Serbs were provoked by attacks against them in neighboring towns. He also argues that Muslims had already exhibit-

ed their intention to drive the Serbs from Prijedor by blocking Serb travel on the main road to Banja Luka and other Serb areas in Bosnia.

In the spring and summer of 1992, Serbs repeated the pattern of terror, attack and conquest used on Kozarac against numerous other Muslim towns in northwestern Bosnia. The Serb campaign had its intended effect. By some estimates, hundreds of thousands of Muslims fled northwestern Bosnia in those months, leaving vast, historically multiethnic areas firmly in Serb hands. In the process, Serbs captured thousands of men, women and children and interned them at makeshift concentration camps. The largest and most infamous of these camps was located in the town of Omarska, seven miles from Prijedor's city center. Danijel says he and Rade do not know the location of the Omarska camp. For the first time, I am not sure whether to believe my otherwise open and friendly companions.

Without apparent reluctance, Rade drives us toward the infamous town of Omarska. I remain silent, confident that the geography of the small place will lead us to the site. On the way, I suggest terms for the visit: no photos or questioning of locals. These rules appear necessary to avoid attracting unwanted attention and to protect my new Bosnian Serb acquaintances from hostile questioning by security forces after my departure. Danijel and Rade agree readily. As we arrive in Omarska, Danijel repeats the importance of not attracting attention. "The people feel ashamed," Danijel justifies. I ask whether those who have reason to be ashamed deserve protection from scrutiny. He hangs and shakes his head silently in a manner that indicates partial but not complete agreement. In my mind I hear him say what I have felt from many of the Serbs with whom I have spoken in Prijedor. *Do not be so quick to judge. You, an American, do not understand us. You cannot know what life was like here. You cannot feel the weight of our history. You do not know what was necessary to survive.* After a minute of reflection, Danijel explains in a quiet, but resolute voice, that for ordinary people (the residents in Omarska, foot soldiers such as he and Rade) the morality of their behavior during the war was more ambiguous than the international community understands. Most Serbs did not commit war crimes. Ordinary Serbs did not want war, but war found them nonetheless, at which point they followed their leaders just to survive.

Tadic stands accused by over a hundred witnesses of having participated in dozens of sadistic acts of rape and ritualistic execution.

An old rail line runs along the outskirts of Omarska. A large industrial zone—complete with a grain elevator, several sheds, a few commercial rail cars and piles of fresh lumber—occupies the flat land on the Southern side. Rade stops at the big gate. Danijel and Rade say nothing, nor do I. Somehow, we feel this was the place. Its high fences resemble those that held captive

thousands of young Muslim men; haunting photos of their emaciated torsos peering from the pages of newspapers around the world in August of 1992. It was here in a white building across the road from the industrial zone that Dusan Tadic reportedly joined Serb guards from the camp in daily or nightly acts of almost inconceivable barbarism. Tadic, the café proprietor who served in neither the Yugoslav nor Bosnian Serb Army, stands accused by over a hundred witnesses of having participated in dozens of sadistic acts of rape, sexual assault, castration and ritualistic execution. Unfortunately, his acts appear all too typical of the atrocities that occurred in Prijedor during the conflict. We sit in silence for some time. I try to imagine the scene during its darkest days. From behind the decrepit buildings, rusting barrels and scrap metal strewn throughout the compound, I half expect to see woeful faces or catch in the air echoes of screams the world did not hear in time.

Though the truth may be more complicated, the events in the towns of Kozarac and Omarska defined for the West the conflict in Bosnia in simple, understandable terms. The Serbs were the aggressors, the Muslims their victims. As we head back to Prijedor on a minor road, Danijel grows philosophical. He says the war robbed him of the best years of his life. He should have attended university and has lost the opportunity forever. He must work to support himself now and cannot afford tuition in the post-socialist Yugoslavia. Along the way we pass a schoolhouse in the town of Trnopolje, just outside Prijedor. Thick eight-foot-high wooden posts surround its small grounds, which includes a small soccer field. The posts are unconnected by wire and appear to serve no present purpose. I suspect the site to have been another camp.

Danijel and Rade drop me at the Hotel Prijedor at about 6 P.M. I walk to one of the many bustling cafes along the main pedestrian boulevard. A healthy looking 30-year-old man sits down nearby. He introduces himself as Milovan. Like Danijel, he works as a translator. Milovan says he studied at Cornell University before the war. For several minutes we speak about the elections. Milovan expresses his thoughts with uncommon directness and precision. Though he says he considers himself a Serb nationalist, Milovan talks of the economy and reconstruction more than ethnic politics. Milovan explains that he left the United States in 1991 to join the Yugoslav Army out of a sense of duty. He did not support the war, but he felt it was inevitable. "The war in Yugoslavia was fed by greed," Milovan says. The economy had collapsed, the masses were frustrated, and nationalism provided a common enemy whose resources could be taken. "This was true of all sides, Muslim, Croat and Serb. Serbs had to fight or we would have been ruled by them," he notes unapologetically. "Muslim leaders in Sarajevo speak of a single multiethnic Bosnia, but what they desire is a Bosnia that they control, religiously, economically and politically. They were the most extreme communists, and they do not value democracy now. They do not believe in minority rights." In Milovan's words I hear an old Balkan expression, *Why should I be a minority in your country when you can be one in mine?* "CNN depicts the Muslims as victims," Milo-

van proclaims. "They are not victims; they merely lost the war. The Croats won the war, but the West does not blame them as it does the Serbs."

I ask about Omarska. Milovan thinks it was a bad place. He believes those who controlled the camp used it for their own financial gain. "They would let people buy freedom," he explains. "Many people left this way." I ask about other camps. "I have watched the Tadic trial in the Hague on Court TV," Milovan states. "The prosecutors say there were many camps, but only one camp existed—at the industrial zone in Omarska." Milovan admits that women and children were forcibly detained on the grounds of a school in nearby Trnopolje. "That was not a camp," he protests. "Their relatives could bring them food." I await an expression of irony; none comes. I ask about the large blue ceramic tile factory outside of town—a subject of discussion among international police observers. I suspect the building to have been the location of the notorious Keraterm camp. "That was a place for interrogations of Muslim and Croat soldiers," Milovan concedes, "but it was not a camp." According to Simo Drljaca in a 1993 interview, more than 6,000 "informative talks" were held at various locations in Prijedor during which Serbs identified roughly 1,500 Muslims and Croats as enemies of the Serb people. Most of these people were killed, it appears. Nevertheless, my otherwise thoughtful companion seems to take comfort in his distinctions. Milovan acknowledges that many atrocities occurred around Prijedor in the early days of the war. He believes in individual accountability for war crimes, but he fears the international tribunal at the Hague is biased against Serbs. He sees strong U.S. support for the tribunal and the disproportionate number of Serbs indicted relative to other ethnic groups as evidence of bias against Serbs. I return to the Hotel Prijedor. In the lobby, I hear from observers that the count has begun in Novi and Prijedor without incident.

Monday, September 16, 1996

With no fog and few cars on the road at 6:30 A.M., Rade speeds toward IFOR headquarters outside Banja Luka. The division's chief of staff, a British colonel, has offered me a ride to Sarajevo. Rade stuffs a bottle of *slivovic* in my bag as he and Danijel say good-bye. Danijel hopes I will remember the Serb people fondly. A small helicopter with camouflage markings approaches from low on the horizon. The gunner jumps from the sliding steel door as the small aircraft lands. He flashes an all clear signal and I walk directly toward him. The gunner redirects me to approach from the front to avoid the rotating blade. At the aircraft, he thrusts forward ear-protecting headphones and taps one of three side-facing canvas seats. The colonel jogs from a nearby building and takes an adjacent seat. I fumble with my seat belt. The gunner secures it. The helicopter retakes to the air in less than a minute. Excited by my first military helicopter ride, I shoot several photos as we lift off. The colonel flashes a charitable smile. Midway through the flight I realize I have my headphones on backward. The communication microphone is sticking out the back of my head.

For the next hour, the helicopter traverses the war-ravaged landscape of central Bosnia at less than 1,000 feet. IFOR convoys inch down the mountainous roads of an otherwise deserted land. Fallow fields and ruined houses are the landscape's dominant features. In its emptiness, the land below is tranquil. What contradictions are found in Republika Srpska: its seemingly friendly people harbor such contempt for their physically indistinguishable ethnic neighbors in a place where neither religious nor cultural traditions run particularly deep after decades of socialism. Centuries-old ethnic wars that produced repressive occupations, the facts of which are long forgotten, live on in myth and folklore that pass as history. It is this history, accepted as an unfalsifiable faith, that continues to define the Serbs of Bosnia. To themselves, they are of the West, not the East. Yet the West, they believe, has misunderstood and abandoned them. More than anything, however, they consider themselves victims. These sentiments have tragic consequences. To many Serbs, their history validates ethnic prejudice and hatred. As the tragedy that befell Bosnia reveals, the lessons of the past, when stoked by economic self-interest and political manipulation, justify in the minds of many of these people rape, torture and murder. Consider too the elections. Many local Serb officials adhered to the technical minutiae of election day rules as though it were a matter of personal and ethnic pride. Collectively, however, they systematically skewed the results through years of ethnic purges reinforced by continuing *de facto* restrictions on freedom of movement, expression and association. Such are the contradictions of militant nationalism. The helicopter sails above blackened haystacks in presumably mined fields of clover. Villages that many once called home exist now as mounds of burnt brick and rubble. The absent villagers probably count themselves lucky to have escaped the fighting with nothing but their lives. A short-term visitor cannot comprehend this place, these people. Nothing in Bosnia is as it seems, except the misery caused by war.

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