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Response by David N. Gibbs

Abstract

David N. Gibbs responds to the six scholars who addressed his article in this issue of *Class, Race and Corporate Power*.

Keywords

Srebrenica; Srebrenica Massacre; US Foreign Policy; Humanitarian Intervention

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Response by David N. Gibbs

We have seen how invoking memory of the Srebrenica massacre has helped to justify humanitarian interventions in general, while suppressing criticism of these interventions. In his response to my article, John Theis of Lone Star College in Texas offers a case study of how such suppression is conducted. Theis recounts how his college invited social activist Michael Parenti to lecture on the subject of imperialism, and the college was subjected to an international campaign of intimidation – with eighty-seven separate letters directed to the college – aimed at preventing Parenti from speaking. The campaign was led by Balkan activists who objected to Parenti’s views on the Bosnian war.

Note that I disagree with much of what Parenti has written on this topic, which in my view veers too far in the direction of minimizing well documented Serb atrocities. However, there is no excuse for trying to shut down Parenti’s lecture (which did not even focus on Bosnia). The Lone Star case draws attention to a larger issue, which is how bullying and threats have been used to stifle free discussion on the issue of the Bosnian war. There are numerous additional cases: When Ian Buruma wrote an article that questioned whether the idea of genocide applied in the Bosnia case, he was promptly denounced as a genocide denier; Buruma never wrote on the issue after that incident. In Croatia, when an aide to the president wrote a favorable review of a book that criticized Western intervention in Bosnia (it was actually my book), there was an orchestrated campaign to get the aide fired from his job. When a Danish member of ICTY tribunal criticized court president Theodor Meron for unreasonably pressuring other judges, he was promptly removed from his position, and then vilified on the Internet.¹ Anyone who speaks critically on this topic, no matter how well qualified or mainstream risks damage to one’s reputation, which dissuades honest discussion. The Lone Star incident is far from the only example.

In logic, there is the familiar fallacy *ad baculum* – the appeal to force – wherein someone seeks to “win” an argument by making threats against those with opposing viewpoints. The basic idea is “Agree with me – or else.” The *ad baculum* fallacy is now being used with regularity regarding virtually all discussions on the historical significance of the Bosnian war. Readers who think I exaggerate can easily find evidence on the Internet.

And the Bosnia case has spawned a more generalized atmosphere of denunciation directed at critics of US and NATO interventions. The most recent example involved the 2011 Libya intervention. Critics of the intervention were subjected to a systematic campaign of vilification in Internet-based sources, as well as the print media.² These attacks focused on the moral character of the anti-war activists, rather than their substantive arguments. To be sure, such personalized attacks have long been the province of the political right, associated with tradition of Joseph McCarthy. What is noteworthy about the present era is the extent to which such attacks often emanate from politically liberal or even leftist circles, where there is considerable enthusiasm for the idea of humanitarian intervention, along with a need to denounce

¹ On the attacks against the Croatian presidential aide, see “Bosniak NGO’s Ask Croatian President to Take Action against his Advisor,” *Dalje*, January 18, 2014, <http://arhiva.dalje.com/en-world/bosniak-ngos-ask-croatian-president-to-take-action-against-his-adviser/495675>; regarding the experiences of the ICTY judge, see Marie Dhumieres, “Judge Thrown off Yugoslavian War Crimes Tribunal for Criticizing ‘Change of Direction’ in Verdicts,” *Independent*, September 25, 2013. The attacks against Buruma can easily be found on the Internet.

² I have discussed this issue in D. Gibbs, “The ‘Decent Left’ and the Libya Intervention: A Reply to Michael Bérubé,” *Counterpunch*, November 25-27, 2011, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/11/25/the-decent-left-and-the-libya-intervention/>.

opponents of intervention. The atmosphere of denunciation originated with the Bosnian war, and this has been one of the war's most enduring legacies.

Scott Laderman in his response rightly notes that the idea of humanitarian intervention had long preceded the Bosnian war. Appeals to humanitarian sentiments, he notes, had been a major justification for US policies in Vietnam, and indeed throughout much of the Cold War. The idea was that American military power was used altruistically to some extent, to protect people from the evils of Communism. Laderman is certainly correct on this point. Of course, humanitarianism also was used to justify colonialism in an earlier era (e.g. "the white man's burden," *la mission civilisatrice*). Clearly, the concept of humanitarian intervention is not novel.

What *was* novel in the Bosnian case was the widespread invocation of the word genocide as a means of mobilizing support for intervention. This had the effect of engaging people's emotions ("we have to do something!"), while shutting down the higher mental functions. One might say that, physiologically, it activated the amygdala, rather than the frontal lobes. The idea that genocide occurred in Bosnia, as well as Iraq, Libya, Syria, Darfur, and numerous other actual and potential interventionist targets has become nonfalsifiable; any objections that the word has been overused amounts to genocide denial, and is automatically unacceptable. One would think that people would reserve using the word genocide for only the more extreme forms of atrocities – in Rwanda for example³ – but this has clearly not been the case.

One effect of this narrative has been to devalue of the whole concept of genocide by crying wolf too many times. Another effect has been to encourage one US intervention after another, while precluding any accountability for interventionist failures, including the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. And Jean Bricmont notes new legislation in the US Congress, which seeks to further enshrine the idea of genocide prevention as one of the main pretexts for US militarism. Bricmont additionally reminds us how many hundreds of thousands of lives were lost as a result of these policies. All of this seems a peculiar way to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust, or the Srebrenica massacre.

Bricmont also challenges some aspects of my article, specifically the section where I affirm the widely accepted view that the Srebrenica was orchestrated by the Bosnian Serb political and military leadership, including Radovan Karadžić. Bricmont seems uncertain that Karadžić helped orchestrate the Srebrenica massacre. I disagree with him. The basic facts of the massacre, including the involvement of Karadžić, have been so well documented that there should be no reasonable doubt regarding the record of what happened. The *interpretation* of these facts as constituting genocide or justifying military intervention is a separate matter. But the facts themselves seem clear. Bricmont recommends Diana Johnstone's writings on Yugoslavia. In some respects, I liked Johnstone's book *Fools' Crusade*, particularly in its debunking of the dubious rationales for NATO intervention. But Johnstone shares with Parenti a dismissive attitude with regard to well established Serb atrocities, and Serb misbehavior more generally.

Latha Varadarajan offers some friendly criticisms of my article, noting its inadequate treatment of US motives for intervening in the Balkans, and also its superficial assessment of whose interests were being served by intervention. She emphasizes the larger context in which the interventions occurred including "the almost overnight disappearance of the convenient 'evil

³ It does *not* follow however that external military intervention in Rwanda would necessarily have improved the situation. For a sober view of the Rwanda case, see Alan J. Kuperman, "Rwanda in Retrospect: A Hard Look at Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000.

empire,' the sudden opening up of once unreachable potential markets, the shifts within factions of the capitalist class, the threat by the EC to strike out on its own," among the various factors that influenced US policy in the Balkans. I agree with the criticism, though for reasons of space I was unable to address these larger points. I have however addressed the issue of US motivation at length in previous publications.⁴

Kees Van der Pijl also emphasizes US motives for intervening in the Balkans. He asserts that the United States was seeking to parry post-Cold War challenges to its hegemony, emanating from a newly assertive European Community/Union, possibly in combination with a resurgent post-Soviet Russia. Van der Pijl is surely correct that the Europeans were actively mounting a challenge to US hegemony during the 1990s, at least in the financial and diplomatic realms, and also to some extent in the military realm as well. This challenge greatly worried US officials and business interests; countering this European assertiveness helped motivate the United States to intervene in the former Yugoslavia, as a means of showcasing US power as well as establishing a new purpose for the US-dominated NATO alliance. On the other hand, I have seen little evidence that Russia played any decisive role in the diplomacy of the Balkans, due to its exceptional economic weakness and the political disorder that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, Russian anger at what they perceived as aggressive US-led interventions in the Balkan region, as well as the expansion of NATO, which was closely associated with the interventions, helped lay the groundwork for the US-Russia conflict of the present day.

John Feffer's Comments

Since Feffer's response is the most critical of my article, and since the issues he raises are fundamental to our understanding of US policy, I will reply at length.

There is a familiar "standard account" of the Bosnian war, which asserts that US officials were passive throughout, and deferred to European leadership in managing the crisis. The passivity prevailed up until the summer of 1995, when the Srebrenica massacre finally shocked President Clinton into supporting NATO airstrikes against the Serbs – which saved the day. This account is a fairy tale. In reality US officials were actively engaged in the Bosnian conflict from the very beginning, and they were undermining international mediation efforts, as I have shown in my article. Reality aside, many intellectuals still hold with great conviction to the standard account. In his response, John Feffer offers a particularly spirited – if ill-informed – reiteration of the standard perspective.

Central to Feffer's argument is his claim that in 1992, Secretary of State "James Baker supported to the EC [peace] process, and at least formally so did [US Ambassador] Warren Zimmermann." Once we remove the qualifier ("at least formally"), Feffer is denying that US officials did anything to impede the peace process in Bosnia. In fact, this claim is contradicted by a large body of evidence. I have already presented much of this evidence in my article, but given Feffer's objection, I will now present this evidence more fully.

The former Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia James Bissett emphasized the role of Ambassador Zimmermann in blocking agreement:

⁴ See for example, D. Gibbs, "Washington's New Interventionism: US Hegemony and Inter-Imperialist Rivalries," *Monthly Review* 53, no. 4, 2001. Note that Dr. Varadarajan has more fully explored some of these issues in the following highly informative book: Emanuele Saccarelli and Latha Varadarajan, *Imperialism: Past and Present*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Within days of the [Cutileiro] Agreement, the United States Ambassador, Warren Zimmermann flew to Sarajevo and met with Izetbegović. Upon finding that Izetbegović was having second thoughts about the agreement he had signed in Lisbon, *the Ambassador suggested that if he withdrew his signature, the United States would grant recognition to Bosnia as an independent state.* Izetbegović then withdrew his signature and renounced the agreement.⁵

In other words, Zimmermann offered the Bosnian government a clear incentive – immediate US recognition – if they were to renounce the Cutileiro plan. I also note the previous quotes from my original article, including the *New York Times*, former State Department official George Kenney, and Cutileiro himself, which all point to a US role in blocking agreement.

And contrary to Feffer’s claims, Secretary of State Baker also was working to scuttle the peace plan. According to the official Dutch investigation of the Bosnian war, “Baker’s policy was now directed at preventing Izetbegović from agreeing to the Cutileiro plan.” The section of the Dutch report that discusses this period is pointedly entitled, “The Cutileiro Plan and its Thwarting by the Americans.”⁶ Peter Carrington, a former British foreign minister and an EC mediator in Bosnia stated in an interview that the “American administration made it quite clear that the proposals of Cutileiro... were unacceptable.”⁷ Carrington also claimed that American officials “actually sent them [the Bosnians] a telegram telling them not to agree” to Cutileiro’s proposed settlement.⁸ Following the collapse of the peace plan, the Bosnian war commenced almost immediately.

The above statements all contradict Feffer’s peculiar claims about US *support* for the Cutileiro effort.

Feffer insists that the Serbs and to some extent the other ethnic groups would never have accepted a compromise peace plan, no matter what the US position. There is considerable evidence against this view. A published report by the Central Intelligence Agency, for example, notes that in April 1992, “the Serb leaders [in Bosnia] were probably still willing to accept a single state organized into a loose confederation divided into three ethnic ‘cantons,’” similar to the earlier Cutileiro plan.⁹ Clearly, US officials worried that a peaceful settlement of the Bosnian conflict *was* a realistic possibility – sufficiently so that they made strenuous efforts to undermine the negotiations, as we have seen.

In addition, Feffer implies that US officials could not possibly have influenced the actions of various Bosnian players against the Cutileiro plan, even if they wished to do so. This seems naïve, given the enormous clout that US officials wielded both globally and regionally

⁵ Website of James Bissett, “Balkan War, Balkan Peace, Balkan Future?” section on “Bosnia,” www.deltax.net/bissett/western/bosnia.htm. Emphasis added. The quote may contain a minor inaccuracy, since it appears that the actual signing took place in Sarajevo, not Lisbon; but Bissett’s main contention regarding US opposition to the agreement is well supported.

⁶ Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, *Srebrenica – A ‘Safe’ Area*, 2003, pp. 395-400, http://publications.niod.knaw.nl/publications/srebrenicareportniod_en.pdf. The NIOD study was commissioned by the Dutch parliament.

⁷ Carrington interviewed in the documentary film “Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War.”

⁸ Quoted in Brenden Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia*. London: Allen Lane, 2001, p. 66.

⁹ US Central Intelligence Agency, *Balkan Battlegrounds: A Military History of the Yugoslav Conflict*, Vol. I. Washington, DC: CIA Office of Russian and European Analysis, 2002, p. 140.

during this period, when the United States emerged as the world's only superpower immediately after its victory in the Cold War.

Following the failure of the Cutileiro plan, the European Community continued to seek diplomatic solutions to the Bosnian conflict, which extended over three years. These efforts were largely directed by David Owen, a former British foreign minister, who was an EC (later EU) mediator for Bosnia. One of several Owen-sponsored plans was the Vance-Owen peace plan. In his response, Feffer states: "The Vance-Owen accord... was undone by the Bosnian Serbs, who voted in Assembly against ratification." In making this point, Feffer tendentiously focuses on a single snapshot event extracted from a highly complex negotiation process,¹⁰ in which all sides at various times alternated between intransigence and conciliation.

And Feffer elides a key fact: US officials worked assiduously to sabotage the Vance-Owen plan, a point repeatedly emphasized by Owen himself. Owen later testified as a court witness at the Milošević trial, which generated the following exchange:

Milošević: "You described... that the new [Clinton] administration had already made up their minds and were *intent on killing off* the [Vance-Owen plan]."

Owen: "There is no doubt that was what they were doing."¹¹

In his memoirs, Owen added: "From the Spring of 1993 to the summer of 1995, in my judgment, the effect of US policy... was to prolong the war of the Bosnian Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Whether prolongation was recognized [by the US] as being the policy I do not know."¹²

In short, US policy helped to *cause* the Bosnian war, and then became a key factor that enabled the war to drag on for more than three years, leading to 100,000 deaths, including those killed in the Srebrenica massacre. This is an appalling record. Feffer's efforts to whitewash this record do little to increase our understanding.

I note that Josip Glaurdic and Robert Donia, whose work advances views similar to those of Feffer and whose books were criticized in my article, were both contacted by CRCP editor Ronald Cox, who asked for responses; Glaurdic and Donia declined to offer responses.

¹⁰ I have analyzed at length the collapse of the Vance-Owen plan in D. Gibbs, *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009, chap. 6.

¹¹ Owen testimony, ICTY, November 4, 2003, p. 28560, icty.org. Emphasis added. Note that Owen was technically a court witness, but he was sufficiently valuable to the Prosecution that his testimony has been grouped under the list of Prosecution witnesses on the ICTY website.

¹² Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*, pp. 400-401.