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# **This Was Not Our War**

Bosnian Women Reclaiming the Peace

*foreword by William Jefferson Clinton*

Duke University Press Durham & London

2004

## Preface

September 11, 2001, I was sitting at my desk, writing captions for my photographs of shelled buildings in Sarajevo, for the Bosnian edition of this book. With shock written across her face, a colleague summoned me to the tv. I watched as a plane hit the second World Trade Center tower. Then I returned to my desk, not daring to say aloud what I was thinking: “Now maybe we’ll understand what the people in Bosnia felt.”

How naïve. Wasting no time on reflection, America’s leaders launched into bellicose breast-pounding. Human rights were flagrantly disregarded. The world map was painted in black and white: “You’re either for us or against us,” President Bush declared. The terrorist act was transformed into an excuse for attacking Iraq, whose leader, our erstwhile friend Saddam Hussein, was suddenly worth spending hundreds of billions of dollars to bring down.

The “opportunity costs” of that decision were staggering. With the same resources, America could have solved most of the humanitarian crises in the world and become the friend of billions. Instead, legions of Muslims feel humiliated by the arrogance implicit in our go-it-alone foreign policy and have vowed revenge.

What went wrong?

The swagger in our current foreign policy leadership is not only unseemly but also dangerous. To quote a wise bumper sticker, “We’re making enemies faster than we can kill them.” In contrast, this book proposes a decidedly unswaggering view of foreign policy. It looks to long-term relationships rather than short-fused rhetoric. It grapples with issues in the gray middle — issues like accountability in the midst of mass hysteria, the preservation of privilege cloaked in victimhood, and the psychological demand for justice. It elevates the voices of those who can distinguish between religion as a path for life and religion as a pretext for killing. It empowers leaders invested in a safe place for their children more than territory for themselves. It listens to the cries of women in war, understanding that their experience is instructive and their perceptions insightful.

Such common sense is often ignored nowadays by the foreign policy establishment. I certainly wasn't taught it in my ambassadorial training. In fact, just how I became aware of the importance of listening to women's stories is a story in and of itself, beginning a decade ago.

On July 4, 1994, during a lull in the fighting, I flew down to Bosnia in the belly of a cargo plane, strapped in between 50,000 pounds of flour — supplies urgently needed to feed the 200,000 Sarajevans under siege since April 5, 1992. I was bringing greetings from President Clinton to a few hundred Bosnians gathered in the American embassy yard to celebrate our "national day." On the patio next to the bare building (our flag flew over an embassy not yet furnished or inhabited), I met with seven women who, in bizarre juxtaposition with the grittiness of war, wore pearls, high heels, and carefully applied makeup as they relayed accounts of practicing medicine in hospitals without anesthetics and teaching architecture classes without pencils. A cardiac specialist described how she had not seen her octogenarian parents for two years, even though they lived only a fifteen-minute walk away — but across a war line she couldn't penetrate. This was the jagged disconnect of their lives: sophisticated, educated women coping with blunt barbarity.<sup>1</sup>

I was not in Bosnia and Herzegovina out of duty. My job as ambassador to Austria should have confined me to American-Austrian relations. Truth be told, during my posting the relationship between Washington and Vienna was solid and didn't need extensive tending. Meanwhile, a few hundred miles south of the erstwhile imperial capital, the Balkans were ablaze. I couldn't ignore the weary pain written on the faces of the 70,000 refugees who had spilled over the border into Austria, whose testimony of atrocities our embassy personnel gathered.<sup>2</sup> My host government might have resented my looking south, to the Balkans. But trouble in Bosnia, in the center of the former Yugoslavia, affected the entire region. My involvement was more than tolerated by the Austrian government. It was anointed.

Soon after my single-day introduction to Sarajevo under siege, the war heated up again, and the U.S. State Department barred my returning. Washington was loath to risk a nonessential visiting ambassador serving as a sniper target. But I couldn't forget the images and stories of that first visit. Now the word was out among Bosnians: an American official had come to listen to the women. Not only that, I was nearby, in their former capital. Bosnia had been an outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Vienna was psychologically familiar. Women like the ones I had met in Sarajevo began to come to me. They sometimes risked

their lives crossing war lines, finding their way to my office in Vienna to plead for U.S. intervention to stop the carnage, which they insisted was politically—not culturally—driven.

I sent their accounts back to Washington and raised questions about U.S. intelligence descriptions of this conflict as a religious or ethnic war we could only let play out. Those intelligence reports, sent to the White House replete with tales of “Muslim extremists,” might as well have been crafted by President Slobodan Milosevic’s public relations team. Meanwhile, the women’s pleas were being drowned out by the shouting match inside the Beltway. President Clinton was receiving strong advice from Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell and others not to get involved. My voice blended with those of U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright, Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Richard Holbrooke, and U.S. Ambassador to NATO Robert Hunter, insisting that our intervention should have been early and forceful, and that we still needed to lean forward into the fray.

With the death of Tito and demise of communism, Yugoslavia was in chaos. So was the State Department, which, I was told, had not been so split since Vietnam. The lack of U.S. intervention had been a theme in the 1992 presidential debates, with Governor Clinton castigating President Bush for inaction. But Bush realized that the American public knew, and cared, almost nothing about this country outside Western Europe, with towns whose names suffered a chronic shortage of vowels. There Serbs lived in Croatia, and Croats lived in Serbia, and a smattering of them all ended up in Bosnia. Few could, or wanted to, decipher the internal politics resulting in the flood of media accounts that led with tales of stomach-turning depravity.

Ignorance was not an option for our embassy. I learned, however, that within the foreign policy establishment my close interaction with women in the conflict was an anomaly. In thousands of hours around tables where the fate of Bosnia was shaped, Bosnian women were systematically and consistently absent. The same was true in meetings organized by Bosnian officials or by leaders of “the international community,” that unwieldy amalgam of military, political, and humanitarian organizations that rush into fragile countries, trying to do as little harm as possible while doing good. Although women were highly organized—over forty associations, linked in an overarching union—they were almost never present in policy-making settings.

One exception was Tatjana (TANJA) Ljubic-Mijatovic, the only woman in the seven-member Bosnian presidency, and one of the women profiled in this book.

We became friends in early 1994, with frequent contact through the diplomatic corps (she was the Bosnian ambassador to the UN in Vienna), in addition to collaborating on half a dozen projects for Bosnia. Another woman at the policy table was Biljana Plavsic, a key Bosnian Serb leader and first president of the postwar Republika Srpska, who later turned herself in to the war crimes tribunal at The Hague.<sup>3</sup> Plavsic confided to me that she was put in the top position by Radovan Karadzic (sociopathic Bosnian Serb president, barred from political life after being indicted as a war criminal) precisely because he thought he could control her since she was a woman.<sup>4</sup> And finally, there was Mirjana Markovic, head of a small communist party in Serbia, wife of Milosevic, and reputedly a more ideological Marxist than her husband, known better for his political cunning. Markovic never figured in the scores of policy conversations to which I was privy, even though her influence over Milosevic was said to be significant.

The wartime roles—positive and negative—of these women raise the age-old question of whether or not the world would suffer less war if women were sharing power, a query that usually provokes a chorus of “What about . . . ?” followed by a litany of women known to be tough as nails: Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Golda Meir. . . . In fact, Plavsic and Markovic stand out as exceptions among the large majority of Yugoslav women, who held moderate political views. Aggressive and bellicose women may force their way to the policy table; for the moderate majority, there is no easy entry. So it was in Bosnia. Although women comprised well over half the adult population after the war, their opinions were not sought, nor were their ideas welcome. That omission marred international peace efforts before, during, and after the war.

Though my involvement with Bosnian women was considered a breach of boundaries and a nuisance by several midlevel officials in the U.S. State Department, the naysayers were trumped by President Clinton, who encouraged me privately and publicly. Likewise, our ambassadors to Bosnia—first, Victor Jackovich,<sup>5</sup> later, John Menzies<sup>6</sup>—urged me to come down to Sarajevo whenever and however I could. Even when I couldn’t go into Bosnia, I was closely involved from Vienna. In addition to organizing several international conferences, I hosted the 1994 negotiations, led by Ambassador Chuck Redmond, that created the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a key turning point in the war, bringing the Bosniaks and Croats together to literally join forces against the Serbs.

In those weeks of meetings, I met dozens of Balkan political leaders deciding matters of war and peace, as well as lawyers debating and crafting a new consti-

tution. All were men. One was Ejup Ganic, whose wife, FAHRIJA and children were living incognito in Vienna (an option not available to most Bosnians) while he continued as a political leader in besieged Sarajevo. The signing of the Federation agreement at the White House was presided over by President Clinton. Among the policy players I counted ninety-nine men and only five women, all Americans (including Madeleine Albright and me).<sup>7</sup> Although Bosnian women held more graduate degrees than men, there were no women among the lawyers, diplomats, and political leaders. U.S. hosts did not think to invite them, and Bosnian leaders did not think to send them.

The “men only” pattern continued in every meeting I witnessed as the conflict continued to rage. In mid-1995, U.S.-led bombing of Serb positions reinforced the negotiating process that brought an end to the war.<sup>8</sup> At the subsequent Dayton peace talks, which allowed nationalists to carve up the country and governance system, the strong view of the women that the country couldn’t be divided along ethnic lines would have been an important corrective. But there were no Bosnian women at Dayton, which was, in effect, a conference of warriors, each deciding how he could leave with the greatest advantage possible.<sup>9</sup>

Women’s exclusion from that policy table may have been intentional on the part of the war makers, who may rightly have believed women would have pursued peace above nationalist aims. After the war, for example, Plavsic turned away from Serb nationalism and moved toward the democratic West. But for the United States and others attempting to end the conflict, ignoring women was patently counterproductive. Perhaps because of their familial and social roles, most Bosnian women were ardently committed to ending the violence. Likewise, in the postwar search for talent to fit the daunting tasks of reconstruction, the exclusion of the majority of the population was a serious and systemic policy flaw. In the end, those who waged the war were selected to plan and implement the peace—a ludicrous tradition rarely questioned by otherwise enlightened leaders within the international foreign policy establishment.

Within two weeks of the peace signing in December, my husband, symphony conductor Charles Ansbacher, and I spent a week in Sarajevo at the invitation of Ambassador Menzies. At the ambassador’s request, we brought space heaters in our suitcases, and we unrolled sleeping bags on army cots in an embassy office, down the hall from the office of the plenipotentiary U.S. official who slept next to his desk for seventeen months, rather than dodging snipers to travel to a separate residence. While Charles worked with the remnants of the Sarajevo Philhar-

monic, which he would conduct on New Year's Eve, I met with women from all over the war-torn city.<sup>10</sup> I was haunted by their pain, inspired by their courage — and concerned at how their voices weakened when they were in the presence of men.

On the evening of December 31, 1995, I watched my husband cajole the soul out of the strings of the Sarajevo Philharmonic (seven of seventy had been killed). At my side was a new friend, *MEDIHA* Filipovic, the only woman out of forty-two members of the national parliament, with her handsome son, Bojan. This was the first public gathering since the end of the siege. Mediha and I looked out on the hopeful faces of international journalists, including Roy Gutman and Christiane Amanpour, who had covered — and uncovered — war stories such as the Omarska concentration camp and the massacre in Srebrenica.<sup>11</sup> In the front row were a dozen other women activists with whom I'd spent the previous evening strategizing — by candlelight after the electricity suddenly went off. Looking at familiar faces sprinkled throughout the audience of the elegant National Theater, I realized that we were not merely subjects and observer, or citizens and American official; our thoughts and emotions were as blended as the Beethoven.

That week in Sarajevo was a turning point: I decided to invest my political capital in the women of Bosnia. In the spring of 1996, I invited a group of Bosnian women leaders to spend several days in our embassy residence in Vienna. There, journalist *NURDZIHANA* Dzozic proposed a conference in Sarajevo with women of diverse backgrounds determined to transform their devastated communities. I offered to help and was pulled even deeper into the work of Bosnian women to rebuild their country and secure the peace.

Postconflict Bosnia brought tremendous challenges. Bitterness, anger, and anguish lay under every pile of political rubble. As the international community moved into positions of authority, I received encouragement from Michael Steiner,<sup>12</sup> a German diplomat who served as the “number two” in the Office of the High Representative, set up in Sarajevo immediately after the peace agreement was signed. Steiner had been approached by women who had joined forces across conflict lines to find their missing sons, fathers, and husbands. He was convinced they were a symbol of new possibilities for the country — not as victims, but as a potential force for stabilization. He repeatedly urged me to meet with them, help find outside funding, and find ways to elevate their voices. They were transforming personal tragedy into energy to restore their homeland. Perhaps their example could cut through the thick pessimism that clouded many reports among influential international media.<sup>13</sup>

Convinced that Washington was ignoring an important untapped resource, I approached President Clinton. He immediately made a mental connection between these Bosnian women and the vital role of women in stabilizing Northern Ireland. On his instructions, the State Department appropriated five million dollars to launch the Bosnian Women's Initiative (BWI), which was designed late one night around my dining table. The BWI funded hundreds of cottage industries, such as one-room sugar cube production, as well as modest animal husbandry and medium-sized businesses. The Initiative also encouraged the growth of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to manage the funds. (ANA and VALENTINA Pranic, as well as ALENKA Savic, were involved in that program.)<sup>14</sup> The president's public announcement of the Bosnian Women's Initiative at the G-7 meeting in Lyons, France, in July 1996 signaled the place of Bosnian women in restoring a peacetime economy and establishing a democratic political system.

One day in early 1996, TANJA came to my office to urge, *If there's one more thing you can do for my country, help the survivors of Srebrenica*. After a year of scant aid, feeling forgotten, and their pleas for help unheeded, the women had organized public protests, taking to the streets of Tuzla, a city swollen with refugees. They'd thrown a rock at the window of the Red Cross office. The surviving widows told me privately that their frustration was not only over the lack of information but also the indifference of Red Cross employees. That organization, on the other hand, was stymied by the Bosnian Serb authorities, who continually refused to provide information about the missing or access to the mass graves, despite guarantees in the Dayton accords.<sup>15</sup>

The desperation of Srebrenica survivors like KADA Hotic was backfiring. A midlevel State Department official insisted I should not get involved because the women were "dangerous." "I didn't realize they were armed! And what are their weapons? Rocks?" I asked, facetiously. Ambassador Menzies intervened, saying my help was not only welcome but needed. In mid 1996, I helped the widows (a term they rejected, hoping it wasn't true) stage the one-year commemoration of the massacre. The afternoon was not only a ceremony of grief but also a protest of their having received no word of their missing boys and men, who had, in fact, been executed and thrown into mass graves.<sup>16</sup>

And so it was, working with the women of Bosnia: A few official voices of encouragement prevailed over warnings for me to stay away. A seminal grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development supported technical assistance to Balkan women's NGOs.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe devoted part of a staff member's time to encouraging



women across Bosnia to organize politically.<sup>18</sup> In both cases, the women could have used ten times the help, but at least the gesture was there.

Support for Bosnian women was clear and unambiguous from General Wesley Clark, who became NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe shortly before I left Vienna.<sup>19</sup> In August 1997, my husband and I were dining in Brussels with Wes.<sup>20</sup> General Clark was about to escort U.S. Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) to Bosnia. The senator had repeatedly called for the pullout of U.S. troops. General Clark asked if I might gather some women, to try to impress on her the importance of the troops in maintaining stability. The next week, I brought together a multiethnic group of thirteen activists from all over the country. That group included journalist RADA Sesar, who had interviewed me two years earlier, and JELKA Kebo. When the senator arrived for her one-hour meeting with the women, perhaps poorly briefed on the political nuances of the situation, she urged them to "just put the past behind you and invite your enemies over to your kitchens for a cup of coffee." The former principal of the Srebrenica high school told the senator she'd had a house, two cars, and a mountain home. Now she had no kitchen to which to invite her enemy for coffee. Instead, the women presented to Senator Hutchison the plan for a new League of Women Voters of Bosnia and Herzegovina they had just worked on creating, complete with governance structure and first-year action steps. The senator didn't seem convinced by the women. I thought they were magnificent.

On my departure from the State Department in late 1997, I opened a Sarajevo office of my private foundation, from which I continued my work with Bosnian women for several more years. Among a number of initiatives, we brought together several women, including NADA Rakovic, to Washington, to collaborate across political parties. The next step was convening a large conference, which helped inspire a quota for women in the parliament. Vacillating between hope and depression, my Balkan friends were putting back together their lives and their country, piece by piece, their creativity and skills frequently outstripping the sluggish and uneven pace of postwar politics. Their vision jumped into bold relief against the backdrop of Milosevic's campaign against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.<sup>21</sup> As the Serbian leader tightened his noose there, Bosnians writhed. The parallels between the new war and their recent nightmare were too deep for dispassion, given only four years between the conflicts. For people from the former Yugoslavia, the terror was the same, whether inflicted in Croatia, Bosnia, or Kosovo. The carnage stemmed from one political source, and the security of Bosnia

rested in part on the success or failure of Milosevic in Kosovo. Several Bosnian women I knew were housing Kosovars who had fled the region. FAHRIJA told me that listening to their accounts of the growing crisis reopened Bosnians' wounds, which had not had time to heal.

That political and psychological connection between Bosnia and Kosovo (and further, Macedonia) is clear in the words of EMSUDA Mujagic, ball-of-fire organizer from the town of Prijedor, who witnessed the barbarity of the Bosnian war. She is a talented entrepreneur, which made her a target for elimination in the concentration camp, a fate she escaped through wits and luck. But Emsuda is extraordinarily generous as she describes the Serb army that held her captive. She gives the soldiers the benefit of the doubt. *They were fed myths by Milosevic's regime. They still don't know they committed crimes against everybody, including themselves.*

A vignette of Emsuda's words and work shows the juncture where postwar healing encounters hard-core Realpolitik. In the new democracy, Emsuda agreed to teach Bosnian Serbs how to organize NGOs.<sup>22</sup> She relayed to me an exchange during a training session in Bosnia, as NATO was bombing to keep Serb forces from overrunning Kosovo. *Even before "Hello," the workshop participants said, "We can't believe they're bombing Serbia! They've targeted the tobacco factory! And they bombed the bridge in Novi Sad!"<sup>23</sup> Do you understand? Sick people can't get to the hospital!" I thought to myself, "I sure do understand. In Sarajevo people couldn't go fifteen meters to the hospital because of snipers." I wanted to ask why they didn't think of other people who'd suffered just because they had a different religion. But they didn't want to talk to me. They said, "Radovan Karadzic was our president, and even though he's been accused of war crimes by The Hague tribunal, we won't renounce him."<sup>24</sup>*

Here is Emsuda, rising above personal trauma to train those who may be making life easier for her former torturers. But she's no Pollyanna. And she's no saint. In words sometimes profound, sometimes petty, she lays bare essential truth as she sees it. Emsuda, champion of peace, is no pacifist. She knows the danger of non-action, and she will not simply declare herself withdrawn from the fray. Still, she lets loose her frustration: *What am I supposed to say? When people we think are moderate and rational swear allegiance to Karadzic, can you imagine what the rest of that community is like—the ones we say are more radical? That's why we have to respond radically. I'm sorry there had to be a NATO action against Serbia, but if NATO had acted seven years earlier when the Serbs attacked Bosnia, there wouldn't have been a crisis in Kosovo.*

Bosnian women have earned the right to make such bold statements. They've suffered the effects of the mixed messages, hesitation, and foreign policy mean-

dering of the “international community,” led by Americans, whenever we chose to get involved.<sup>25</sup> In their words and deeds are lessons citizens and policymakers alike can ponder. This book was written to bring the extraordinary message of ordinary women into earshot of those who shape the world order. With that goal, I was warned by several Bosnians that I should change the title, which was tainted on two counts. First, it was reminiscent of President Izetbegovic’s disavowal of war as the Serbia/Croatia conflict heated up, a stance some say led to the Bosnian government’s lack of preparedness and subsequent vulnerability when Bosnia became the target of violence.<sup>26</sup> Second, “This is not my war,” delivered with a tone of disgust or apology, was associated with people finding ways to escape Sarajevo—a distancing, denying at the same time their identification with the violence and their responsibility for the survival of their country. My Bosnian publisher, on the other hand, was intrigued by the ambiguous twist. The women in this volume disavowed the violence, yes, but they leaned forward, rather than pulling back, to confront the challenges of postwar Bosnia.

Indeed, it is precisely because this was *not* their war that they should shape the peace.