

## **“Yugoslav Disunity and the New World Order” Memorandum for Robert Gates**

From: BLAIR DORMINEY<sup>1</sup>

Washington, D.C., October 19, 1990



Blair Dorminey’s memorandum for Robert Gates (then Deputy National Security Adviser) – kept at the Records of the National Security Council in the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library<sup>2</sup> – represents an early analysis of the critical situation of Yugoslavia made in the White House and a unique interpretation of its perspectives in the light of the proclamation of the “New World Order.” In fact, the author built on that idea, outlined by George H. W. Bush in September 1990, so as to recommend a change in the official U.S. policy towards that country, which, merely verbally, consisted on supporting its unity and territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup> The new approach would apply New World Order’s values, such as freedom, security, and the rule of law, to the “growing global trend toward disaggregation of ethnic groups and polities.”

Dorminey’s approach was fundamentally essentialising ethnic nations and legitimising new nationalist energy in Eastern Europe. In this vein, it was concurrent with Francis Fukuyama’s definition of the role nationalism would play in the

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<sup>1</sup> Director of Policy Planning, National Security Council, 1988-1990

<sup>2</sup> George H. W. Bush Presidential Records – National Security Council Numbered Files, ID #9008332, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas

<sup>3</sup> A broader analysis of the document, in González Villa, Carlos: “From ‘pessimism’ to geopolitical instrumentalisation: Revisiting the US policy towards dying Yugoslavia”, *Annales: Series Historia et Sociologia*, Vol. 27, n. 4 (2017): 699-712

liberal order he envisioned for the world after the Cold War: A seemingly non-ideological local social regulator in a globalised world:

"Nationalism is not one single phenomenon but several, ranging from mild cultural nostalgia to the highly organized and elaborately articulated doctrine of National Socialism. Only systematic nationalism of the latter sort can qualify as a formal ideology on the level of liberalism or communism. The vast majority of the world's nationalist movements do not have a political program beyond the negative desire of independence from some other group or people, and do not offer anything like a comprehensive agenda for socio-economic organization. As such, they are compatible with doctrines and ideologies that do offer such agendas."<sup>4</sup>

The memorandum included a handwritten comment by Robert Gates, who challenged the implications of Dorminey's standpoint:

"It is not clear to me that this [Dorminey's approach] is usually economically or politically sensible or sustainable *if* [emphasis in the original] the alternative (union/confederation) can be made voluntarily or democratically. Do you think an independent Bosnia or Slovakia [sic] is advisable? Will these end irredentist claims or bring peace? Or that each is an economically viable entity? Should we apply this to tribal federations in Africa? Where [and] how do we draw the line, such as in USSR? It's a tough problem and an intellectually and politically challenging one."

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In fact, the administration was particularly concerned with stability in Eastern Europe and the future of the Soviet Union by the end of 1990. Gates' dismissal of the memorandum's approach was not related to the Yugoslav situation as such, but to its consequences in the regional context. Through its ideological assumptions and geopolitical reasoning, the memorandum shows that, in the U.S. administration's thinking, Yugoslavia was not a tangible reality anymore, but an instrumental artefact that, at most, could only be significant as a precedent for the Soviet Union's fate.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3-18. This publication was made while Fukuyama was serving as a member of the policy planning staff at the State Department

BLAIR DORMINEY - MEMORANDUM FOR ROBERT GATES

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506

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INFORMATION

MEMORANDUM FOR ROBERT GATES

THROUGH: NICHOLAS ROSTOW *NR*  
FROM: BLAIR DORMINEY *ABD*  
SUBJECT: Yugoslav Disunity and the "New World Order"

The accelerating breakup of the Yugoslav federation is one of several crises at the denouement of the Cold War which will give definition to a new era. Almost instinctively, I note, we have reacted by attempting to hold this jerry-built Balkan conglomerate together. That reaction may very soon be put in a new light if threats to use force to prevent Yugoslavia's dissolution are made good.

My point is that we should consider carefully our opposition to disunion in Yugoslavia in light of the precedent it may set for dealing with the seemingly growing global trend toward disaggregation of ethnic groups and polities.

Much has changed, obviously. Yugoslavia's breakup does not mean geopolitically what it would have earlier. More fundamental, while the President has yet to articulate with any specificity his vision of a "new world order," that order presumably will be one of freedom and security built on the rule of law. In an environment secured against unlawful coercion and violence, greater political devolution is imaginable. Risks to stability are reduced. Prudential arguments previously in play against movements for self-determination, autonomy and secession are less compelling.

We have a long way to go yet to realize a world order under law, but enough has changed to warrant considering cases such as Yugoslavia's in light of where we are headed.

*It is not clear to me that this is usually economically or politically sustainable or if the alternative (union/confederation) can be made voluntary + democratic.*

*Do you think an independent Bosnia or Slovakia is advisable? Will this end "irredentist" claims or bring peace? Or that each is an economically viable entity? Should we apply this to other federations in Africa? Where + how do we draw the line, such as in USSR? It's a tough problem - and an intellectually and politically challenging one.*