

The American Council for Kosovo
The Lord Byron Foundation for Balkan Studies
REPORT ON THE KOSOVO CONFERENCE IN WASHINGTON D.C.

“Kosovo, a Preventable Disaster.”

Capitol Hill Club, Washington, DC

Tuesday, October 23, 2007

Over the past decade Washington D.C. has been the venue of countless conferences and symposia on Kosovo by the International Crisis Group, the United States Institute of Peace, the Wilson Institute, and a myriad of like-minded institutions. All of them shared one unchangeable assumption: that independence is the only solution for the troubled southern Serbian province. Their only disagreements, if any, have been how to get from where we are now to carving up Serbia and welcoming “Kosova” into the “international community.” No voices opposing the wisdom of that outcome have been allowed a proper platform and a fair hearing over the years.

In early September **The Lord Byron Foundation for Balkan Studies** initiated the convening of a conference on Kosovo in Washington D.C. with the specific and frankly stated intention to challenge this prevailing wisdom. The Foundation’s partner in organizing this conference was **The American Council for Kosovo**, which provided support with the administrative and logistic tasks and publicity.

After a preliminary event – a reception at Washington’s Capitol Hill Club for 50 invited guests on Monday evening, October 22 – the conference itself was held on October 23 under the title of “Kosovo, a Preventable Disaster.” The event was held from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. and attracted some 70 attendees in all. Admission was free. All direct costs, including hospitality and catering, as well as travel, board and lodging for out-of-town panelists, were covered by the LBF.

Ten panelists who gave presentations at the conference did not agree on every point, but all of them were generally critical of the assumptions that are enshrined in current U.S. policy on Kosovo. To that extent, this conference *was* “the other side” in the hitherto non-existent debate, and it has contributed to the creation of some badly lacking balance.

The conference was well attended by Washingtonian standards for this type of event, and the quality of discussion during Q&A sessions was remarkably high. Those present included journalists (and a TV camera team from the Voice of America), Congressional staffers, policy analysts from various government agencies, foreign diplomats, and members of the public.

The keynote address by Ambassador **James Bissett**, Chairman of The Lord Byron Foundation, opened with the warning that the breakup of Yugoslavia was the first serious challenge facing the Western countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union – and they made a mess of it.

They are still making a mess of it; and if a decision is made in the coming months to grant independence to the Albanians in Kosovo – as the United States seems determined to do – then the decision will simply add to, and compound, the many errors and mistakes made by the US-led Western powers... marked by duplicity, double standards and cowardice... More seriously, western intervention in the former Yugoslavia has shaken the global framework of international peace and security that has governed the relationship among sovereign states since the founding of the UN.

After analyzing the disastrous legal and political consequences of the current U.S. policy and stated intentions, Mr. Bissett concluded by saying that the new breed of American political leaders have betrayed the trust bestowed upon them by the Founding Fathers: “By doing so they have abandoned the very principles upon which America was founded and which are enshrined in the UN Charter.

By doing so they have lost the moral authority that formed the real strength of the democratic countries in overcoming the forces of totalitarianism.”

According to **James Jatras**, Director of the American Council for Kosovo, Washington’s irrational and destructive Balkan policy is to a significant extent the product of the ignorant and misguided notion that the U.S. can curry favor in the Islamic world by sacrificing Kosovo’s Christians to the violent jihad-terror elements that dominate Kosovo’s Albanian leadership. Such an unfounded notion, which shows a breathtaking incomprehension of the worldwide jihadist threat, has been expressed by Mr. Bush personally, by other Administration officials, as well as by Democratic leaders in Congress. Nonetheless, in Jatras’s view, prospects for a unilateral declaration of Kosovo’s independence and Washington’s recognition are not a forgone conclusion in light of splits in the EU and the certain opposition of not only Serbia and Russia, but China, India, Indonesia, and many countries in Africa and Latin America. The Bush Administration’s failing domestic credibility is a further weight on the policy, which can be dealt a fatal blow if enough Americans raise their voices against it.

Professor of Strategy at the Naval War College **John Schindler** opened with the warning that “the much-misunderstood Bosnian jihad remains a troubling template for future Al-Qa’ida operations in the Balkans” – especially Kosovo – and across the world. Al-Qa’ida considers the Bosnian war one of its top-three victories (along with Afghanistan in the 1980s and Chechnya in the mid-1990s), as it provided Bin Laden’s legions with a place to win critical battlefield and propaganda experience. Dr. Schindler said that the jihadist success in Bosnia can be attributed largely to the successful application of *information operations* as a core element of strategy: “The importance of IO has been regularly underestimated by the enemies of Al-Qa’ida, and those who hope to defeat the jihad in the Balkans and elsewhere must learn to match the enemy’s formidable capabilities in this arena.” Recognizing Kosovo’s unilaterally proclaimed independence would be counter-productive and detrimental to that objective.

Professor of Political Science at National Defense University **Stephen Mayer** expressed the opinion that in the long run some form of partition could offer a viable solution. This view, which was disputed by some other participants, Dr. Mayer supported by pointing out that the notions of multi-ethnicity, inter-communal tolerance, etc. are simply not applicable to Kosovo: a physical and political division of the communities is the precondition of peace between them.

Director of the Center for the Study of Political Islam **Bill Warner** presented a devastating account of the fate of various minority non-Muslim populations in predominantly Muslim societies. What has happened to the Serbs and other non-Albanians in Kosovo fits in with the tradition of intolerance that is endemic to the Muslim mindset, Warner argued, and that in Kosovo combines with a particularly virulent form of ethnic nationalism to produce a lethal mix. This theme was also developed by **Ben Works**, Director of SIRIUS. His focus was on the phenomenon of “predatory migrations” – of which, in his view, Kosovo provides a classic example. Independence under whatever name and with whatever “guarantees” would only reward the process of ethno-religious cleansing that has been going on since June 1999, and make its completion well nigh irreversible.

Former *New York Times* correspondent in Belgrade **David Binder** focused on the overall dysfunctionality of today’s Kosovo: an economy stuck in misery; a bursting population of young people with criminality as the sole career choice; an insupportably high birthrate; and a society imbued with corruption and a state dominated by organized crime figures. Invoking a German report released last January, Binder noted that political unrest and guerrilla fighting in the 1990s led to basic changes in Kosovo-Albanian social structures. The result is a “civil war society in which those inclined to violence, ill-educated and easily influenced people could make huge social leaps in a rapidly constructed *soldateska*.”

The LBF Executive Director and *Chronicles* Foreign Affairs Editor **Srdja Trifkovic** focused on the need for Serbia to diversify her foreign policy options. Instead of continuing to swear by the pipedream of “European integrations” (not to mention the ludicrous “Atlantic” ones!), Belgrade should make it clear to the West Europeans and to the U.S. that it can no longer be taken for granted. If the pleas and arguments based on legality, morality and common sense are ignored,

Trifkovic asserted, then, perhaps, those based on *Realpolitik* will be heeded: Serbia is still the key to the region, and ignoring her interests will carry a price – yet to be determined and stated by Belgrade – for those who still think that they can carve the country up with impunity.

Doug Bandow started his closing remarks by noting that the only consistency in the U.S. policy in the Balkans is the odd insistence that the Serbs have to lose on each and every account. In Bosnia they are subjected to centralization, but in Kosovo they are asked to accept amputation in the name of self-determination. The Administration is continuing to act as if the outcome in Kosovo is preordained, which indicates that the U.S. has learned nothing since 1999. A unilateral declaration of independence would have numerous bad consequences – marginalizing the UN Security Council, dividing the EU, setting a collision course with Russia, and alienating Serbia which is the hub of the western Balkans. To prevent a series of negative consequences, Bandow suggested, we need negotiations without preconditions and without a prescribed outcome. At the moment the Administration appears adamant to persist in its flawed policy, however. A clear warning from Brussels that the EU would be badly split by the U.S. recognition would certainly help. Serbia needs to focus on lobbying Europeans to that end.

The organizers have received numerous compliments from the audience on the selection of speakers, the quality of their presentations, and the overall level of the event. A retired USAF Colonel with diplomatic experience has noted that, unlike last year when the uphill battle seemed almost insurmountable, this conference had a tone of cautious optimism:

Last year, most people thought Kosovo independence was a done deal. Today... Russia appears to be standing firm; there are cracks in the UN; and those cracks may also apply to NATO. The speakers were excellent. Each gave a unique perspective on the situation that, along with questions from the audience, generated interesting and enlightening discussions. The luncheon remarks by Congresswoman Melissa Bean (D-IL) and Dan Burton (R-IN) indicated some successful headway into Congressional support.

CONCLUSION

The conference took place at a crucial moment for the future of Kosovo and Metohija. With the threat looming of a Kosovo Albanian unilateral declaration of independence and Washington's pledge of recognition, authoritative voices of sanity have laid out the disaster that would ensue. But will anyone listen? Predicting a sudden attack of common sense in Washington is always a risky proposition.

The participation of such respected Members of Congress as Dan Burton and Melissa Bean show that reasonable and courageous people remain even here. More importantly, the conference exposed, if more proof could be needed, the bankruptcy and futility of America's Kosovo policy. It is a policy that cannot prevail if Serbia stays firm and focused, as now is evident to everyone but its authors in government and a few think tanks.

The only remaining question is how much damage the current pilots of the U.S. ship of state will inflict on the people of the region, the Serbian state and nation, the stability of the Balkan region, the security of Europe, a vanishing regard for international legality, and, above all, the American national interest, before either changing course or smashing onto the rocks toward which they have steered.