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Dayton History Project

FINAL

INTERVIEW

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WARREN CHRISTOPHER

U.S. Secretary of State

October 30, 1996

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Contents:

	Page
Christopher's instructions to Holbrooke	2
Sanctions relief as "carrot"	3
Cease-fire <i>vis-à-vis</i> lifting sanctions	4
Tomahawk strikes near Banja Luka/ Allied reaction	4,5
Running out of targets	5,6
US participation in IFOR	6,7
Pentagon planning for IFOR	7
Apprehension of war criminals	8
Length of US troop deployment	7,8
Russian support/Clinton-Yeltsin at Hyde Park	8
Secretary Perry and General Shalikashvili's involvement	8
Contact Group/Russian involvement	9
Relations with US Congress	9,10
Dayton initialing/Paris signing	10,11
President Clinton's possible visit to Dayton	11
Christopher's characterization of three Balkan presidents	12
Plans for possible failure in Dayton	13
Additional issues considered at Dayton	13
The Map Room at Dayton	13,14

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Warren Christopher Interview
October 30, 1996

DEREK CHOLLET (DC): ...beginning with the Operations Center phone log, which you have there, about the call; it may have not been in reference to Bosnia. And then some talking points that Steinberg had given me that were from a call, but he couldn't remember when.

WARREN CHRISTOPHER (WC): Derek, on the 5th of August I was in Hanoi and it's quite unlikely, I think, that I called in from there on Bosnia. I don't have any recollection that would be helpful.

DC: OK.

WC: On the next question, I do recall talking with Dick before he went out on his shuttle and telling him that my policy was to give the negotiator the maximum amount of flexibility, but that he needed to be conscious of the fact that there were some important red lines. I also emphasized to him the difficult history of all the individual players in the region, but that I strongly supported his undertaking the negotiations because I thought he had a unique ability to be effective with these difficult personalities.

DC: Do you recall any of the specific red lines that you might have outlined for him?

WC: I emphasized the importance of remembering that within this Administration and within this country there was great support for the Bosnians and for trying to

retain the concept of a multi-ethnic Bosnia. At the same time, I indicated that Milosevic had demonstrated great charm and persuasiveness with a number of people, but I knew that he understood that we had to be very cautious about dealing with Milosevic because of his reputation. Concessions, at least initially, would have to come from him.

DC: In terms of specific guidance, did you tell him of certain issues that you expected to be consulted on, or was there an understanding that the two of you had about how often he would check in, or was it implicit?

WC: I have had a lot of experience with Dick Holbrooke. I wasn't worried as to whether we would regularly hear from him. *(laughter)*

DC: On the sanctions issue with Serbia, what was your view on the use of sanctions relief as a "carrot" for Milosevic?

WC: We had committed ourselves earlier, when Bob Frasure was leading this effort, to provide a measure of sanctions relief in return for a cease-fire. One of the great achievements that Dick Holbrooke was able to bring off was to obtain the cease-fire without having to make any commitment to the suspension of sanctions at that time. I did think the sanctions had had a major effect in Serbia and were a very important tool to use in bringing Milosevic into support for agreement in the longer term. You asked whether I thought the effectiveness of sanctions might run out. I was very conscious of how heavy a burden the sanctions had placed on the adjacent countries. I knew that we would have to be very diligent, and

perhaps even compensate other countries if we were to maintain the sanctions at their full effectiveness.

DC: Was it difficult to maintain Allied support for sanctions as time went on?

WC: The Europeans were always more ready to lift the sanctions than we were. They were always more forthcoming about it. Milosevic always had more support among many Europeans than we did.

DC: And then, of course, you mentioned the cease-fire. About three weeks after the cease-fire was agreed to on October 5th, a proposal was floated here in the U.S. about possibly lifting -- partially -- some sanctions against Milosevic, prior to Dayton. Do you recall any debates to that effect or what your views were then?

WC: My views were to withhold the lifting as long as we could. Dick thought the atmosphere in Dayton would be improved, as I recall, if the sanctions were lifted on the eve of the conference. I preferred to hold them until we had something in return. There was not a high degree of contention about that, but we were both trying to find ways to make sure that the conference got off on the right foot.

DC: To bounce back chronologically to the NATO bombing campaign and, specifically, the Tomahawk strike against the targets around Banja Luka in northwest Bosnia on September 10. First of all, it seemed to take some people by surprise and some press accounts played it up as a big departure in U.S. strategy. Is there anything more to make of it?

WC: It didn't surprise me because I know the preference of the military for using Tomahawks in areas where there is high pilot risk. I think they felt there were

UNCLASSIFIED

5

some anti-aircraft batteries in that area and that it may have been safer to use Tomahawks there.

DC: Do you remember if they had mentioned this to you in briefings?

WC: Yes. I have a recollection of that. It's not a terribly precise memory, but that is my recollection.

DC: OK. What about the Allied reaction to this? I know, at least, the NAC, the French, and several others said that this was an "upping to the ante," so to speak; that it was not authorized.

WC: If there were those objections made, I found them quite unconvincing when weighed against the pilot risk in those areas where we didn't have good anti-aircraft suppression.

CHRIS HOH (CH): As I recall, at this time, we also heard from the Russians. They warned us that they very much objected.

WC: I thought that there were elements of admiration for our technology that conditioned their response.

DC: Shortly after the September 10 Tomahawk strike, at a PC on September 11, the military informed the PC members that they were running out of Option Two targets -- the only targets authorized at that point by the NAC -- and that bombing was going to have to end soon. Holbrooke has said that you were very concerned about this; that the bombing would end without us being able to negotiate a settlement. Is this characterization accurate?

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UNCLASSIFIED

6

WC: I was concerned. I didn't think we had exhausted the targets. I urged the military to go back and look for additional targets. I thought it was important to carry on the bombing campaign to the point where it would achieve real effectiveness.

DC: Do you recall being surprised when they said they were running out of targets?

WC: There was a degree of skepticism on my part. I urged that they examine whether there really weren't some satisfactory targets left.

DC: As Holbrooke has described it, you urged that he return to the region immediately and, as soon as possible, try to get something. Obviously, he got a great thing.

WC: I felt that the Serbs might well be impressed by the willingness of NATO to bomb on a continuous basis, and by the effect of the bombing. I think that subsequent developments proved that to be correct. I've heard Bob Owen and others say that they saw a sea-change in Serbian attitudes after the bombing.

DC: Do you recall if the rest of the PC was relatively agreeable to the idea of getting the shuttle team out to the region again as quickly as possible and the military leaders to extend the campaign for a few more days to try to get something for this?

WC: All I remember is that was the result.

DC: OK. Now on to IFOR. What were your views, throughout the whole process, on U.S. participation in an implementation force? Did they evolve at all from the summer and throughout the fall?

WC: I was never in any doubt that if we were to mount an implementation force, it would require participation by the United States. I was convinced that the

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Europeans would not again undertake that kind of a mission without United States involvement.

DC: What were your views on the scope of the involvement? Did you believe that we had to lead the mission?

WC: I thought it would require a strong degree of U.S. leadership, that the U.S. would have to be in a strong role at NATO in order to maximize the chances of success.

DC: What sort of direction did you and your fellow civilian principals give the Pentagon -- if any -- on IFOR? Or was it simply left up to the military to create the plans?

WC: Derek, the military had been planning for something like IFOR for many months; so there were very extensive plans. At Dayton, we integrated the very extensive NATO planning with the political decisions that were taken there. The military role in Dayton was a very significant one because it was a rare time that the military was in on the ground floor in designing the mission and the tasks for IFOR. Thus, I think, this was one of the reasons why it was so well carried out. The military tasks were carried out extremely well.

DC: What about some of the issues concerning the specific role of IFOR in, for instance, something that's in the newspapers today: the apprehension of war criminals, or the one-year duration of U.S. forces?

WC: On the duration issue, the military planners thought that they could complete their military tasks well within the year. Their basic timelines were a year. There was a very interesting controversy as to whether it was better to try to fix the time, or

to have the time be elastic. I was more persuaded by the argument that establishing a timeline was in the overall interest of the mission.

DC: What about on the war criminals aspect, or enforcement during elections?

WC: That was essentially a matter of discussion with the military. They emphasized that the military mission had to come first and that resulted in the dichotomy between what they were committed to do and what they were authorized to do. That was a useful distinction. Of course, IFOR has done many things now beyond what they were committed to do.

DC: Now on to Russia, which was a key issue throughout this whole process, but oftentimes viewed as a side issue when we're looking at the shuttles. What were you most concerned about regarding Russia's support in this process?

WC: The Russian participation was signaled by the historic meeting of Presidents Yeltsin and Clinton at Hyde Park. That was the origin of the important change in Russian attitudes toward IFOR. As far as the details went, Secretary Perry deserves great credit, and also General Shalikashvili, for working out what were basically military details of Russian participation. The details were very complex but they made them work. Secretary Perry had a number of "wiring diagrams" as to how it might be done. As to the matter of persuading the Russians that their troops could operate under NATO command, I think you know that ultimately they were willing to serve under U.S. command, not a multi-national command. Secretary Perry would be your best source on details of those negotiations:

- DC: What about on the peace process in general? Was it mostly done through the Contact Group, or did you keep in touch with Kozyrev on the course of negotiations and just made sure that their support was there?
- WC: The Contact Group was regularly used for purposes of coordination and I was in fairly regular touch with Kozyrev.
- CH: What was your sense of their major interest, what they were hoping to get out of this in ways that we thought might be precedent-setting in terms of cooperation?
- WC: I think their principal goal was to be a major participant or a major player and not be excluded from the process. That was what helped to persuade them to agree to the arrangement for the use of Russian troops. Indeed, I think that fact motivated their participation. Secondly, I think they always had a political necessity to be concerned about the reaction of the Duma and the Russian populace toward the Serbs. That was another consideration.
- DC: Switching gears to the Congress, which is another very important piece of this puzzle. What was your advice to the President in securing congressional approval?
- WC: My advice was to involve the Congress in the process to the greatest extent so that when we got to the end of the process they would feel committed and supportive. There was always some tension in that because we were not disclosing the twists and turns of the process to anyone, particularly when operating under Dayton rules of confidentiality. But since Congress had been pressing us on this issue for

years, I thought it was time to respond by saying, "We're doing something about it; now we need your support."

DC: I know that there were periodic meetings over at the White House with the joint leadership. Did you ever follow up with phone calls or other visits?

WC: I regularly participated in those White House meetings. I was constantly involved in discussions with members of Congress. I won't try to summarize the results for you, but the bottom-line is that our participation was not blocked by Congress. That is frequently what Congress ends up doing: not taking full responsibility but not blocking executive action.

DC: How was the decision made to seek congressional approval for IFOR? Was it something you had to do legally or politically?

WC: The President concluded on the basis of advice from a number of us that whatever his raw legal power might be, it would be a mistake not to seek the support of Congress in one way or the other. And we committed to that quite early on.

BENNETT FREEMAN (BF): You testified on the 21st of October, and again the second or the third of December.

WC: I testified that we would work with the Congress.

DC: Let's move to Dayton. Any comments on the decision made back in October to stagger the actual signing between Dayton and Paris?

WC: The French were determined to have some kind of formal event and we were determined that the negotiations should be in the U.S. in a relatively isolated place. We concluded that there could be a ceremonial event in Paris as a way to

give recognition to the European role and the sacrifices Europe made in contributing to this endeavor over the years and would contribute in the future. Paris was chosen as the site because the French were the first to volunteer and insist. *(laughter)* That goes back to part of the Holbrooke shuttles. Early on he had mentioned Paris as a site and we were trying to find some way to reconcile that with our desire for a Dayton meeting.

DC: Apparently they argued that it was stemming from the 1992 London Conference which took place prior to this Administration. Was it ever seriously considered that President Clinton would go to Dayton?

WC: Yes, it was considered right up to the very last morning at Dayton but scheduling made it impossible. There were always pros and cons about whether or not he would, but on that last day -- when we didn't reach agreement until the last moment -- it was not feasible for him to come. I think that the only time that I thought that it was feasible for him to come was after an agreement was reached.

DC: I see. At what other points was it thought he might come? Was it always at the end?

WC: I don't remember if there were serious proposals for him to come out to Dayton earlier. We would not have wanted to involve him in that precarious endeavor with that cast of characters without knowing if it would be successful.

DC: Absolutely. In my last few -- impressionistic -- questions, I'm trying to get a good sense of how you felt about Dayton and your role there. One way to get at

this is asking who you thought the toughest interlocutor was, who was the most reluctant to come around.

WC: There's no doubt that the person who was most reluctant was President Izetbegovic because he was giving up sole leadership of his country -- flawed as it was -- for a power-sharing arrangement. That regularly bubbled to the surface. Hence, that made him -- quite understandably -- reluctant to go along. Milosevic was a very tough, tough man, sometimes almost brutally tough, but he was certainly somebody who you could have a serious debate with on these issues. President Tudjman was not so directly involved and I think he found it quite to his advantage to play a mediating role between the parties and thus exhibit his strength as a mediator.

DC: When you went out to Dayton on November 18, did you intend to stay until the end, whether a success or a failure?

WC: Derek, I went out for a day then I went to Japan. I went back to Dayton from Japan and I stayed on. I felt I would stay until it either succeeded or failed. We set a deadline of Sunday, November 19, and then extended it. That was a demanding schedule with the Japanese trip in the middle and then around-the-clock negotiations.

DC: At the times in which you thought that maybe the negotiation wasn't going to work, did you think at all of what the next step would be and what would come out of this?

WC: We never felt we would let it turn out to be a total failure. We would simply say the parties had "suspended" the negotiations and return to the shuttles. But I also was well aware of how the press would play any situation where the three presidents came together for this long and didn't succeed. I talked to the President the night before we concluded and told him that there was a very substantial chance that we would not succeed. Basically, he gave me authority to do the best I could. In my judgment, trying to keep it going longer at Dayton would set back the ultimate process.

In the four days I was there, I was involved with a multitude of issues -- we've only identified three or four of them. A lot of time was spent on the map with the parties trading various areas; e.g., on getting Milosevic to agree to give up Sarajevo; working out the road to Gorazde. There were many issues like that that came up in the last four days. I'm sure you've had explained to you the Map Room that we had.

DC: The power scene. Yes. Were you there that night?

WC: Yes. We could always go in and pull up on the map any one of those boundary areas and look at them in great detail. Chris [Hoh], you remember how important that was?

CH: I remember it vividly. I was very impressed by it and the way that people from the Balkan delegations were impressed. At one stage, the problem was that because the system could rapidly calculate the percentages of territory, the Serbs realized they were not getting their 49 percent.

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14

WC: And that was one of the reasons that caused the giving up of the "snail's foot" in northwestern Bosnia, which in turn produced the false peace.

DC: Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

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