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The President's Radio Address and an Exchange With Reporters

February 19, 1994

My fellow Americans, this morning I want to speak with you about the conflict in Bosnia. My administration has worked for over a year to help ease the suffering and end the conflict in that war-torn land. Now, a prolonged siege of the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo has brought us to an important moment.

In the coming days, American war planes may participate in NATO air strikes on military targets around Sarajevo. We do not yet know whether air strikes will be necessary. But I want to talk with you about what American interests are at stake and what the nature and goals of our military involvement will be if it occurs.

The fighting in Bosnia is part of the broader story of change in Europe. With the end of the cold war, militant nationalism once again spread throughout many countries that lived behind the Iron Curtain and especially in the former Yugoslavia. As nationalism caught fire among its Serbian population, other parts of the country began seeking independence. Several ethnic and religious groups began fighting fiercely. But the Serbs bear a primary responsibility for the aggression and the ethnic cleansing that has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions in Bosnia.

This century teaches us that America cannot afford to ignore conflicts in Europe. And in this crisis, our Nation has distinct interests. We have an interest in helping to prevent this from becoming a broader European conflict, especially one that could threaten our NATO allies or undermine the transition of former Communist states to peaceful democracies.

We have an interest in showing that NATO, the world's greatest military alliance, remains a credible force for peace in the post-cold-war era. We have an interest in helping to stem the destabilizing flows of refugees this struggle is generating throughout all of Europe. And we clearly have a humanitarian interest in helping to stop the strangulation of Sarajevo and the continuing slaughter of innocents in Bosnia.

I want to be clear: Europe must bear most of the responsibility for solving this problem and, indeed, it has. The United Nations has forces on the ground in Bosnia to protect the humanitarian effort and to limit the carnage. And the vast majority of them are European, from all countries in Europe who have worked along with brave Canadians and soldiers from other countries. I have not sent American ground units into Bosnia. And I will not send American ground forces to impose a settlement that the parties to that conflict do not accept.

But America's interest and the responsibilities of America's leadership demand our active involvement in the search for a solution. That is why my administration has worked to help contain the fighting, relieve suffering, and achieve a fair and workable negotiated end to that conflict.

Over a year ago, I appointed a special American envoy to the negotiations to help find a workable, enforceable solution acceptable to all. And I have said that if such a solution can be reached, our Nation is prepared to participate in efforts to enforce the solution, including the use of our military personnel.

We have participated in the enforcement of economic sanctions against Serbia. We initiated airdrops of food and medicine and participated in the Sarajevo airlift, a massive effort, running longer than the Berlin airlift, which has relieved starvation and suffering for tens of thousands of Bosnians. Together with our NATO allies, we began enforcement of a no-fly zone to stop the parties from spreading the war with aircraft.

We have warned Serbia against increasing its repression of the Albanian ethnic minority in Kosovo. We have contributed 300 American troops to the United Nations force that is helping to ensure that the war does not spread to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which lies between Bosnia and Greece. And we have worked with our allies to ensure that NATO is prepared to help solve this crisis.

In August, at our initiative, NATO declared its willingness to conduct air strikes to prevent the strangulation of Sarajevo and other population centers. NATO reaffirmed that commitment at our summit in Brussels just last month. But the shelling of Sarajevo continued. Two weeks ago, in a murderous attack, a single shell killed 68 people in the city's market. And last week with our NATO allies, we said that those who would continue terrorizing Sarajevo must pay a price.

On that day, NATO announced it was prepared to conduct air strikes against any heavy weapons remaining after 10 days within 20 kilometers of Sarajevo, unless such guns are placed under United Nations control. That 10-day period ends tomorrow night. If the U.N. and NATO authorities find the deadline has not been met, NATO stands ready to carry out its mission. American pilots and planes stand ready to do our part.

I have asked Secretary of Defense Perry and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Shalikashvili, to travel to Italy to meet with their counterparts from other participating NATO countries to review our preparations.

Over the past two days, there have been some encouraging signs in Bosnia that our ultimatum may be working. Bosnian Serb leaders now say they will comply with the ultimatum. There is some evidence that heavy weapons are being pulled back from around Sarajevo, but others remain.

Many nations have helped to underscore the seriousness of our common intent. I have conferred on this matter with Russian President Boris Yeltsin. And the Russians, in the last couple of days, have made very important contributions by using their influence with the Serbs and expressing a willingness to use their U.N. forces to help to enforce this order.

If guns are truly being moved or impounded, we welcome the news. If the Serbs and others fully comply with NATO's ultimatum, there will be no need to use force against anyone. But we are determined to make good on NATO's word. And we are prepared to act. Our actions will be determined by one thing: the facts on the ground.

I want to be clear about the risks we face and the objectives we seek if force is needed. American planes likely will account for about half the NATO air strikes if they proceed. General Shalikashvili has told me that our forces are well prepared for this operation. But the fact is, there is no such thing as a mission completely without risks, and losses may occur. I have conferred with my national security advisers and told them to take every precaution to protect our courageous soldiers in uniform.

Our military goal will be straightforward: to exact a heavy price on those who refuse to comply with the ultimatum. Military force alone cannot guarantee that every heavy gun around Sarajevo will be removed or silenced, but military force can make it more likely that Bosnian Serbs will seek a solution through negotiation rather than through Sarajevo's strangulation and that more innocent civilians will continue to live.

For that reason, I have also ordered American negotiators to intensify their efforts to help the parties reach a fair and enforceable settlement. I have consulted with leaders from both parties in the Congress and asked for their support in this effort. I want us all to stand united behind our forces if they need to conduct air strikes and united in our determination to do our part in bringing an end to this dangerous conflict.

During this Olympic season, let us recall that only 10 years ago the winter Olympics were held in Sarajevo. Today, Sarajevo's athletic fields have been transformed into makeshift cemeteries for those killed in that city's siege.

In the week since NATO issued the ultimatum, the big guns around Sarajevo have fallen silent. Now let us work to help make this break in the violence continue so that Sarajevo's future may be marked by images of peace rather than by those of war and carnage.

While the cold war may be over, but the world is still full of dangers and the world still looks to America for leadership. Now, with our interests at stake and with our allies united at our side, let us show the world our leadership once again.

Thank you, and God bless America.

[*At this point, the radio address ended, and the President answered reporters' questions.*]

Russian Position on Bosnia

Q. Mr. President, has President Yeltsin assured you that the Russian role will be entirely constructive and under the NATO leadership and that there is no risk of a renegade Russian force protecting Serb weapons or Serb forces?

The President. Last night the United Nations Commander on the ground, General Rose, said that he was confident that all the U.N. forces, including the Russian forces, would carry out the U.N. mandate. And I have no reason to believe otherwise.

Q. But has President Yeltsin given you any such assurance? When was your last communication with him?

The President. When did I talk to him—the day before yesterday, I think. And we've been in constant communication. Based on my communications with him, I have no reason to believe otherwise.

NATO Decision

Q. Mr. President, if there is compliance, is Sarajevo sacrosanct, or will you try to extend and pose the ultimatum in other parts where their slaughter goes on?

The President. I think for the next day and a half I'd like to let my statement stand for itself.

Q. Mr. President, could you just give us an idea of what you think the likelihood would be of the need for air strikes?

The President. I have nothing to add to the statement I made on that. I think my statement's pretty clear.

Q. Do you wish you had prevailed a year ago on this, in this action, and could have saved thousands of lives?

The President. We didn't have the votes we needed, though. We didn't have the consensus a year ago, we have now.

Q. Do you agree with Mr. Churkin that if there are air strikes, it could lead to a wider war—it would in fact produce a wider war?

The President. The purpose of the air strikes is made clear in the resolution of NATO and what the U.N. asked us to do. I think it is clear and self-contained and stands for itself. The words are clear.

The President's Health

Q. Are your eyes doing better, Mr. President?

The President. They are much better. The doctor told me that nothing would heal them but time, and they're getting a little better. I don't look like the monster from the deep as much as I did 2 days ago.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:06 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Michael Rose, Commander of the U.N. Forces in Bosnia. Deputy Foreign Minister Vitaliy Churkin is the Russian Special Envoy to the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia.

Remarks on Bosnia and an Exchange With Reporters

February 20, 1994

The President. I talked this morning with Secretary Perry and General Shali and General Joulwan and Admiral Boorda in Europe. There is a lot of activity on the ground. The Serbs seem to be moving weapons and also bringing the U.N. forces to the weapons that cannot be moved. So that much is encouraging. But we are monitoring this as the day goes on. The deadline will stand, and I expect to get further reports throughout the day and to talk to Manfred Woerner later in the day after we see what happens.

Q. There seems to be some flexibility on this deadline. I mean, is it exactly at 7 p.m. our time, even if they found out they couldn't move certain weapons?

The President. The deadline only makes the artillery positions subject to attack, and I think that we should keep the deadline and we should keep working at it. There may or may not be some questions about whether all those weapons can be put into U.N. control, depending as much as anything else on