

Civilian Keynote: Challenges of Transition

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William Montgomery retired in Feb, 2004 after a thirty year career in the Foreign Service, including assignments as U.S. Ambassador to three different countries: Bulgaria (1993-96), Croatia (1997-2000), and Serbia and Montenegro (2000-2004). Ambassador Montgomery's other assignments included Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State for Bosnian Peace Implementation from January 1996 until June 1997; Deputy Chief of Mission in Sofia, Bulgaria from June 1988 to May 1991; and Deputy Chief of Mission in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania from 1984-86. He also served as an Economic-Commercial Officer in Belgrade, Commercial Officer in Moscow, and Political Officer in Moscow. He was Executive Assistant to Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger and then to Deputy Secretary of State Clifton Wharton. He speaks Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Croatian.

At the end of his tour as Ambassador to Serbia and Montenegro, he was awarded the Order of the Star, First Class by the government of that country. Upon his departure from Croatia, he was awarded the Order of Knez Trpimir by President Mesic. He was awarded the Order of the Stara Planina, First Class, by the Government of Bulgaria upon completion of his tour as Ambassador to that country. At the end of his tour as Deputy Chief of Mission, the Bulgarian Government awarded him the Order of the Madara Horseman, First Class. He has one Distinguished Honor Award, two individual and two group Superior Honor Awards, and one Meritorious Honor Award from the Department of State. He is also a recipient of an American Bar Association's Central and Eastern European Law Initiative (ABA-CEELI) award for his efforts in promoting the rule of law in Central and Eastern Europe.

Ambassador Montgomery holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Bucknell University and a Masters of Business Administration in International Business from George Washington University. While working for the Department of State, he completed a one-year international security studies program at the National War College in 1986-87. He also received an Honorary Doctorate from the American University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. He served in the U.S. Army from 1967 to 1970, including one year of service in Vietnam. His army decorations included the Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal for Valor, Combat Infantryman Badge, Parachute Badge, and Vietnam Service Medal.

Two months ago I was asked to give an overview of the Balkan political/economic situation to the National Security Council of Bulgaria. After an hour and a half session, including questions and answers, I had a drink with the head of their Intelligence Service. He and I had known each other during my six years in Bulgaria, first in 1988-1991 as Deputy Chief of Mission at our Embassy and from 1993-1996 as US Ambassador there. He said with a twinkle in his eye and very diplomatically that he remembered me as being self-confident, very sure of my positions and somewhat arrogant. He contrasted that with my just-concluded lecture, which he believed was very different in tone. Was he right, he asked? If so, what had changed?

It was an accurate observation. My experiences with Regime Change in the Balkans and its consequences have had a major impact on my worldview. To be candid, I think that the region has changed me more than I have succeeded in changing it!

I think that my experiences, my disappointments, and my original expectations mirror those of many Americans dealing with democratic transition and the development of civil societies. When I look at the resumes of many present here today and the papers that you are presenting, it is likely that little of what I am about to say will strike you as either something new or especially enlightening. Frankly I hope that is the case, because it would give me more hope for the future. We need far more realism in our policies and practices than we demonstrated thus far in the Post Cold War period.

I have several observations to throw out to you.

- I. First. Some of the highlights of my career have been to witness and, to some extent, to be a participant in the collapse of the Communist Regime in Bulgaria in 1990-1991; the end of the HDZ Regime in Croatia in 1999-2000; and the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. Each of these events made headlines around the world and were widely celebrated in the West as major victories for so-called "Democratic Forces." The United States played a major role in each of these cases. It is fair to say that change would have invariably taken place in all those countries, but it would not have happened as quickly as it did without our active involvement.

What I learned through bitter experience, however, that it actually was comparatively easy to bring down these authoritarian regimes. In an American movie this would be the happy, jubilant ending. But in real life it isn't the ending at all, but only the beginning of a new chapter. And the struggles and difficulties in this new chapter dwarf the challenges we faced under the authoritarian regimes.

The key point is that in each and every one of my examples, we may have brought down a dictator or authoritarian ruler, but what remained in place was a complex system of beliefs, attitudes, systems of governance, political philosophies, religious beliefs, prejudices, and historical experience which was in each case very contrary to Western values, experiences, and traditions.

In a rather naive American way, I guess that my underlying assumption was that underneath it all everybody had inherent democratic values and respect for human rights. All it took was to shake off the yoke of authoritarianism imposed on these civilizations for the flowers to bloom and democracy to establish itself. All we needed to do was help guide the process via advisers and some financial support. I wasn't alone in this belief. We even had a book called "The End of History" which began with the assumption that the democratic market-oriented economic model had "won." Many thought a wave of democracy was spreading which would inevitably cover the world.

Imagine my surprise when in case after case, the “Democrats” who toppled the old regimes rapidly adopted all or almost all of the practices of the old regime. If Privatization took place at all, it was almost always accompanied by breath-taking cases of corruption and cronyism. The new ministers generally learned the profitability of serving in those positions. While some human rights showed improvement, it was far from across-the-board progress. The citizens of those countries remained wedded to the benefits of the Socialist System, and were reluctant to give them up. The forces of nationalism and issues of ethnicity remain very powerful.

Particularly impervious to change were the judiciary, academia, the security services, and the overall government bureaucracy. To this day, in virtually all these organizations in each of the three countries that I have mentioned, there are people in positions of authority who have served the communist regimes. The authoritarian regime in Croatia and Serbia which followed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, and who now “serve” the current democratic governments. This includes professors of economics, judges, and senior intelligence officials.

Democratic transition is an extremely difficult, long-term process with no shortcuts. And this is in Europe. where presumably values are closer to our own than, for example, in the Middle East, Asia, or Africa.

- II. Second. The second lesson is that we need to avoid the trap of insisting on ideal societies when we do intervene. I am thinking now of Bosnia and Kosovo. In both cases, above all else we put the requirement that the geographic boundaries of the two areas should not change and that multi-ethnic societies should take place. In Bosnia we drafted a constitution, which in practice has proved unworkable. It is now fourteen years after the Dayton Agreement and ten years after fighting in Kosovo ended and in both cases, we are still heavily present on the ground and cannot depart without fear of an outbreak of violence. This is in large part due to this insistence on both countries becoming functioning multi-ethnic societies contrary to the wishes of many of the people in both countries.

I was heartened to hear President Obama describe his Iraq policy by saying “We will not let the perfect get in the way of the achievable.” Perhaps we have learned something after all. This was definitely not US government policy for the past two decades in Eastern Europe. We insisted on achieving the “perfect.”

- III. Third. We are caught in a no-win situation with regard to the United Nations. On the one hand, in almost every conceivable international crisis, the United Nations has been either irrelevant or a negative factor due to the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council and the radically different world views that they hold. It is impossible in most cases to get any concrete resolution passed. If one is passed, it is either watered down to the point of meaninglessness or contains provisions actually detrimental to a positive solution. A classic example is Kosovo under pressure to get UN involvement. The victorious NATO worked out

UN Security Council Resolution 1244. To get Russian and Chinese approval it contained provisions recognizing the territorial sovereignty of Yugoslavia (Serbia) and also an article foreseeing the return of Yugoslav military to Kosovo in limited numbers. This gave Serbia hope that it would be able to hang on to Kosovo. Russian refusal to permit a subsequent resolution leading to independence has left Kosovo and the region facing a prolonged conflict, which under the best of conditions and prolonged Western assistance will hopefully become a frozen one.

Another example is Iran, where Russian and Chinese obstruction has blocked meaningful action against the Iranian nuclear program.

The other side of the coin, however, is that every time a Coalition of the Willing acts outside of UN authority, such as with Kosovo independence, it encourages others to do the same. As the world becomes more and more multi-polar, this will become both more prevalent and more chaotic.

- IV. Four. The mechanisms that the international community has at its disposal to modify the behavior of authoritarian governments is not nearly effective enough. Economic sanctions in my view are more counter-productive than useful. Carrots such as assistance will only work to a limited extent and almost never when the ruler sees his/her vital interests threatened.
- V. Five. While probably present everywhere in the world, there is no question that we have fostered a culture which rewards overly-optimistic reporting which supports the policies we are implementing. I saw this for the first time in 1968 in Vietnam. But I also saw it time and time again from our representatives in both Bosnia and Kosovo. By the way, I also saw it in optimistic reporting from our Embassy in Belgrade that Yugoslavia would be able to stay together in 1991 when a short auto trip thru Kosovo to Dubrovnik and Lake Bled convinced me otherwise. Take it from a 30-year veteran of the Foreign Service, you do you and your career no favors if you are perceived not to be in sync with conventional wisdom or if you try to question existing policy or point out that it is not working.
- VI. Six. Our own assistance programs are not nearly as effective as they could be. There are a few reasons for this.
 1. During the 1950s we emphasized large infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, and power plants. But without an effective government, this assistance was wasted and a lot of corruption and mismanagement of resources also took place. So the pendulum moved radically in the other direction: the assistance was targeted at providing advice and helping to build civil society and a strong emphasis on oversight. The result is that the lion's share of assistance often is actually spent for advisors; their Washington-based administration; housing and lodging costs. As an example, when I was Ambassador in Washington, each Treasury Advisor sent to Serbia cost around \$400,000 per year out of our assistance funding. Each American NGO which received a grant to oversee a

program, sent out American staff with salaries, living expenses, and also charged an administrative fee on top of all other charges of up to 20% of the value of the contract.

2. As a corollary to this, an industry has developed in Washington of supposed non-profit, non-governmental organizations, which lobbies hard to win government assistance grants, which they manage. They live or die based on the projects they get. So instead of projects developed from the ground-up, all too often, they are top-down, awarded from Washington on a regional basis.
3. Local players quickly learn the Washington language and soon can repeat it verbatim to us. They tell us what we want to hear. Moreover, individuals which started out working for nothing to make a difference overtime get weaned on a diet of foreign funding and slowly but surely, they become professional NGOs, whose career is based on carrying out foreign-funded programs. More often than we think, these individuals and the organizations that they run are actually despised by a majority of the local population as simply paid agents of the US. This is exacerbated when they carry out programs that please us but upset the local population. A classic example is the radio and television station B92 in Belgrade. It has consistently stood up for Western Values courageously in the face of Milosevic and now against the nationalistic tendencies in Serbia. Everyone knows it has US funding and support. Thus, except for a minority who share its views, others tune into other stations.

The late Serbian Prime Minister, Zoran Djindjic, personally pleaded with me to just give his finance ministry half of our \$100 million annual assistance budget to help regenerate medium and large businesses which had become outmoded due to lack of investment in spare parts and new technology. He believed that turning the economy around and having voters feel progress was being made was the key to the survival of the democratic process. He got nothing but advisors.

- VII. Seven. Lack of knowledge of the country. I have been directly associated with Serbian politics for ten years now and I can tell you that almost daily I learn something new about that country and its players. It is a cliché, but these countries are really like the proverbial onion, where you can peel layer after layer to discover the "Truth." What is truly amazing to me is that the average Balkan person is an encyclopedia of knowledge of an incredible number of people including the family history over generations: the positions held and actions taken; the property held; and the friendships and alliances. Without knowing all the above just as well as the locals, there is no way that we can understand why things happen the way that they do.

- VIII. Eight. The impatience and short attention span of Americans in general means lose the political support and will to see problems through to their end with sufficient resources.
- IX. Nine. The American Military is a superpower second to none when it comes to fighting conventional wars. In fact it has become so successful at doing so that other powers and groups have shifted tactics. The new warfare involves non-state actors, terrorism, guerrilla tactics. This has eliminated many of our strengths.

Fighting this new war, bringing about democratic transition, and dealing successfully with low-level conflict means that military and civilian sides of the US government must work together seamlessly to have a chance — I repeat a chance — to succeed. And it most certainly will require a definition of success which would have unacceptable to us a decade ago.

I saw at first hand in Bosnia in 1996 when the military tried to rigidly limit its involvement in civilian implementation. The short summary is that it didn't work. The same lessons had to be learned all over again in Iraq.

- X. Ten. So what should we expect and what should we do about it?
1. We need to think very carefully before contemplating regime change or undertaking democratic transition anywhere in the world. We will almost certainly be involved far longer than we anticipated with a far greater expenditure of personnel and resources. This means that we need far more reliable and impartial intelligence for starters.
 2. We need to do a good analysis of our assistance efforts — not by A.I.D.! — to see what has worked and what has not. I can give you a formula for bringing down an authoritarian dictator. I need a similar formula for bringing about a successful democratic transition.
 3. We need to do more civilian/military integration dealing with conflict situations and building civil society. This includes joint courses and building expertise. For starters I would have a six-month course in nation-building for an equal number of military and civilian government personnel who would practice working together to solve problems.
 4. We need to keep in front of us President Obama's message on Afghanistan that we will not let the perfect get in the way of the achievable. This means new realism in our foreign policy. It also means ending our policy of treating "Democracy" writ large as a religion, which we are morally bound to bring to the heathen nations of the world.