

The New York Review of Books

The CIA and Bosnia: An Exchange

John Deutch, reply by Charles Lane and Thom Shanker
JUNE 6, 1996 ISSUE

In response to:

Bosnia: What the CIA Didn't Tell Us from the May 9, 1996 issue

To the Editors:

Your article by Charles Lane and Thom Shanker [“Bosnia: What the CIA Didn’t Tell Us,” *NYR*, May 9] misrepresents the high priority which I, and the US intelligence agencies, place upon support to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. I can assure your readers that we in the Intelligence Community understand the gravity of the human rights issues involved in the Balkans and the important work of the tribunal. We are working vigorously to do our part to bring the perpetrators of war crimes to justice.

Let me first correct one major inaccuracy. The authors’ source who claims to have seen US satellite photos of Breko in 1992, showing people and bodies being taken in trucks to and from their deaths, is confused or was misled: there is no such imagery. And, as the article suggests, rumors of intercepted conversations between Generals Perisic and Mladic last summer, which have circulated since last fall, remain exactly that—rumors the US Government cannot substantiate, because it has no information to do so.

The authors justly cite the importance of the discovery by intelligence analysts of subsequently confirmed mass graves of Muslims who tried to flee from Bosnian Serb forces at Srebrenica in July 1995. Detecting the graves required technical skill, experience, perseverance, and sifting through information—incomplete and often conflicting—from multiple sources. This enabled analysts reviewing miles of film for many hours to find something they otherwise would have been hard pressed to identify or locate. The analysts working on this difficult subject have demonstrated extraordinary dedication and determination.

On the war crimes issue, as on all other significant international issues, US intelligence serves policymakers and the Congress with confidential information and analysis. The sensitive nature of the information involved and the sources used to obtain it as a rule preclude public release. This is equally true when the US government supplies an international—or domestic—prosecutor with leads to develop evidence for a court. Indeed, protection of US intelligence information is the law of the land and one of my principal responsibilities.

The article correctly points to competing priorities for intelligence attention, a situation made more demanding by increasing resource constraints. Throughout the war in Bosnia, monitoring military

developments has topped the list of intelligence priorities, along with force protection for UNPROFOR and, now, IFOR troops. US policymakers insist—and we assume that US taxpayers expect—that we make every effort to protect the lives of US military personnel serving their country on the ground and in the skies above Bosnia. At the same time, support to the war crimes tribunal has remained a high priority for the Intelligence Community. The President and other top consumers view the Intelligence Community's effort on the Balkans as a success.

John Deutch

Director, Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D.C.

Charles Lane and Thom Shanker replies:

We thank Director Deutch for his thoughtful comments.

As for the specific complaints raised in the letter, our source stands by the report on classified intelligence imagery from Brcko, including his account of specific visual details we cited. And Director Deutch is incorrect in stating that our article consigns to rumor the intercepted conversations between Generals Perisic and Mladic. Our article cites a US military intelligence source, one who had access to the raw data coming out of Bosnia, who confirmed the existence of a week's worth of such intercepts about the coming assault on Srebrenica. We also refer to three other news reports that quote information supplied by credible sources, among them a West European diplomat, an American diplomat, and a senior US official.

Neither point goes to the fundamental thesis of our article. Our differences with Director Deutch can be summarized as arguing whether the glass is half-empty or half-full in measuring the work of American intelligence in its past reporting from Bosnia on atrocities and its current assistance to the War Crimes Tribunal.

Our article avoids charging a cover-up or malfeasance; in fact, we argue that the American intelligence community acted more or less as could be expected when we take account of bureaucratic inertia, inter-agency competition, military requirements, and the political priorities of two commanders-in-chief, one Republican and one Democrat.

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