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## BRCKO: SFOR vs.



## THE “RENT-A-MOB”



THE OLD AIR RAID SIREN SOUNDED at 4:30 A.M. on August 28, 1997. Soon it was joined by a cacophony of church bells. In a well planned and carefully prepared assault, buses loaded with Bosnian Serb women, children, and paramilitaries in civilian clothes rolled into the slumbering market town of Brcko, Bosnia. As sleepy residents emerged from their homes, they were told that NATO forces had occupied the police station. When the mob reached the police station, it was surrounded by heavily armed American troops. The demonstration spiraled rapidly out of control, with the mob venting its fury against the soldiers, the office of the Deputy High Representative, UN vehicles, and the UN police. The radio station in Brcko added vitriol, urging the population to attack the “occupiers.”<sup>1</sup> As the day unfolded, American soldiers and UN police faced the most serious incident of mob violence directed against peacekeeping forces in Bosnia.

The members of the arriving ethnic Serb “rent-a-mob” were supporters of Radovan Karadzic, indicted war criminal and hard-line former president of the Republika Srpska (RS), one of two entities that composed the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The American troops were from “Tiger Base,” Camp McGovern, the military facility that housed one thousand U.S. soldiers on the outskirts of Brcko. They were members of Task Force Eagle, the U.S. contingent of NATO’s Stabilization Force, which was responsible for the Multinational Division (MND) North sector that included the Brcko region. The UN police officers were members of a special Brcko unit of

the International Police Task Force (IPTF), which was created under the Dayton Accords to monitor the local police.

The ostensible target of the mob was the Brcko police station. It had been subject to an attempted takeover by Serb police officers loyal to Biljana Plavsic, the president of the Republika Srpska. Plavsic was a former Serb nationalist who was now receiving international support for her defiance of Karadzic and the president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic. With municipal elections scheduled for September 13–14, President Plavsic sought to expand her influence by seizing control of police stations across northern Bosnia. SFOR and the IPTF assisted in this effort by helping to expel policemen who remained loyal to Karadzic. SFOR also seized a television transmitter that was used by the former Serb leader to broadcast propaganda against the international community. The goal of these unusual actions was to break the iron grip that hard-liners in the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) retained more than a year and a half after the arrival of the first NATO peacekeepers in Bosnia.<sup>2</sup>

Already a political and strategic flashpoint, Brcko was at the epicenter of the conflict between Serb political factions. Police stations in towns west of Brcko largely fell to the pro-Plavsic forces. Police in towns to the east remained loyal to Karadzic. In Brcko, the local police chief, who was aligned with Plavsic, intended to take over the local police station, which was held by hard-liners loyal to Karadzic. The police chief had alerted the American SFOR commander at Camp McGovern but asked him to stand by. In the confrontation between opposing groups of Serb police, there was a standoff, but the pro-Plavsic group ultimately lost its nerve and capitulated. During this confrontation, SFOR troops took up positions at the police station allegedly to “prevent violations of the Dayton Accords, which among other things barred police from carrying rifles.”<sup>3</sup> SFOR subsequently issued a public statement that it had entered Brcko to deter an outbreak of violence after receiving indications that forces loyal to President Plavsic would try to take control of the police station and local media.<sup>4</sup> Their actions were seen as support for Plavsic by the pro-Karadzic authorities that controlled

Brcko. The arrival of the Serb mob was the hard-liners’ response to the SFOR intervention into Serb politics.

The senior international official in Brcko was an American diplomat—Ambassador Robert “Bill” Farrand, Deputy High Representative and International Supervisor of Brcko—who was awakened by the siren. Farrand’s bedroom was just down the corridor from his office on the second floor of an unassuming building in the center of town. Having slept with the windows open on a hot August night, Farrand’s first thought was that there must be a fire. It then struck him that he had never heard a siren during his four months in Brcko. Moving to the window, Farrand first heard and then made out the darkened forms of numerous people “shuffling” toward the part of town where the police station was located. From earlier reports, he knew the local police commander was a Plavsic loyalist and was intent on removing pro-Karadzic officers from the station. Farrand had expected trouble.<sup>5</sup>

Pulling on his clothes, Farrand went down the hall to his office, where the single guard assigned to watch the building was on duty. The building housing the Office of Brcko Supervisor was a security officer’s nightmare. It was right on the street with large glass windows and no protection. Only the window in the Supervisor’s office had bulletproof glass, a contribution from the Swedish government. The building had a good-sized meeting room on the first floor and offices for Farrand’s twelve-member international staff. The IPTF was previously located in the building but had recently moved its headquarters. Figuring no one would be awake at the Office of the High Representative (OHR) in Sarajevo and doubting he could get through by telephone, Farrand logged on to e-mail. From Brcko the electronic signal went via NATO headquarters in Brussels before returning to Bosnia. In Brussels there was a construction crane on a worksite adjacent to NATO headquarters. When the crane was pointed in the wrong direction, radio and satellite transmissions to NATO headquarters were disrupted and Farrand’s e-mail did not work. In the wee hours of August 28, the crane was pointing in the right direction and the message went through.

Sitting in front of his antiquated computer, Farrand sent a report alerting the OHR in Sarajevo that there was trouble in Brcko and describing what he could see from his window. He concluded the first e-mail by promising to send a similar situation report every fifteen to twenty minutes. For the remainder of the day, Farrand stayed in his office, following events by telephone and through reports from staff members who managed to elude the demonstrators and reach the office. The mob vented its wrath on UN and OHR vehicles parked in front of the building but did not attempt to enter. With a bird's-eye view of the growing mayhem below, Farrand had not seen a single police officer.<sup>6</sup>

Donald Grady, the chief of the UN's IPTF unit in Brcko, had also been awakened by the siren and the church bells. Grady was a former chief of police in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a Ph.D. in applied management, and his six-foot-six-inch athletic frame made him an imposing figure. An African American from Wisconsin, Grady faced the tough challenge in Santa Fe of reforming a police force run by a Hispanic "old-boy network." In Brcko, he had the more daunting task of turning a local police force of Serb thugs into a multiethnic police service.<sup>7</sup> Under the Dayton Accords, IPTF was responsible for reorganizing, retraining, and monitoring the performance of the local police. Unarmed and without "executive authority" to conduct investigations, make arrests, or use force, the IPTF was dependent upon SFOR and the local police for protection.<sup>8</sup> The 257 IPTF officers in Brcko were members of a special unit whose primary tasks were reforming the local police and protecting returning refugees. Chief Grady reported directly to the UN's IPTF commissioner in Sarajevo.

At 5: 00 A.M., Grady left his residence and headed for the IPTF station in the center of Brcko. He discovered that SFOR troops supported by armored personnel carriers had taken up positions in front of the local police station, while SFOR helicopters flew overhead. The station was already surrounded by a mob. A week earlier, Grady had been instructed by IPTF headquarters in Sarajevo to make a weapons inspection of the Brcko police sta-

tion at ten o'clock that morning. Just before 7:00 A.M., Grady received the first of a number of increasingly frantic calls from IPTF Sarajevo ordering him to go ahead with the weapons inspection as quickly as possible. In other towns, SFOR had used the alleged need to protect IPTF weapons inspectors as a pretext for surrounding local police stations and removing pro-Karadzic police officers. Grady tried to plan a snap inspection, but with only the IPTF overnight duty staff available and the streets filling with demonstrators, he quickly realized it would be impossible to comply with the order. At this point, it occurred to Grady that the IPTF headquarters in Sarajevo had advance knowledge of the planned takeover of the Brcko police station, and he had not been informed.<sup>9</sup>

From the IPTF station, Grady made the first of many calls that day to Farrand to brief him on the demonstration. He also sent out vehicle patrols in an effort to determine what was happening in various parts of the town. Demonstrators were moving quickly through the streets, congregating in front of the U.S. military checkpoint on the bridge leading to Croatia, the Deputy High Representative's office, and at various key crossings and access points. They were also blocking roads by building barricades of debris, dumpsters, scrap wood, and destroyed cars, making it impossible to enter or leave town. The barricades channeled SFOR and IPTF vehicles into cul-de-sacs or directly into crowds that climbed on the vehicles and attacked them with stones. Prior to the riot, the Office of the Supervisor and the IPTF had developed a comprehensive plan for the evacuation of all internationals, including the IPTF, in case of an emergency. The plan had been compromised. One of the IPTF local language assistants had passed a copy to hard-liners in the Serb police. Knowing the plan, the demonstration's organizers sent protesters to control the predesignated rallying points and escape routes. There were also well-coordinated mobile teams of rioters with instructions to block roads and prevent SFOR, IPTF, and other internationals from moving.

On the streets, white IPTF police vans with the initials "UN" painted on their sides were magnets for violence. The

mob threw rocks, smashed windows, and dented the sides of the vehicles with two-by-fours. With no means of self-defense, those IPTF officers who could flee did so, driving through gauntlets of people throwing rocks and bottles at their vehicles. Except for three officers who suffered bruises and cuts from flying glass, none of the IPTF officers was injured.<sup>10</sup> The media reported that “IPTF officers in blue helmets and flak jackets” were seen fleeing Brcko in “white UN pickups with smashed windows” toward the safety of Camp McGovern.<sup>11</sup>

The IPTF station also came under siege by rock-throwing demonstrators who quickly shattered all the windows. The crowd attacked UN police vehicles in the station’s parking lot, removing the radios and then turning over the vehicles and setting them on fire. Altogether, thirty UN vehicles were destroyed and seventy others were vandalized and damaged. Inside the IPTF station, the thirty officers on duty barricaded the doors and windows and hid under their desks, but the crowd made no attempt to enter the building. Telephone calls from IPTF officers and other internationals began to come to the station. Most of the IPTF forces, like other members of the foreign community, were trapped in their homes by hostile crowds that prevented them from leaving.<sup>12</sup> Two IPTF officers, Bill Aycock and Joe Jordan, were protected by their Serb landlord, who put the officers’ UN vehicle in his garage and hid the officers in his attic. The landlord told the officers they would be safe, but their vehicle would be destroyed if it was discovered by the mob. When an opportunity to escape presented itself, a group of elderly neighbors formed a protective ring around the UN officers’ van as they drove out of the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

At about 8:00 A.M., Grady made the first of several attempts to get the RS police to control the disturbance. He found the head of the regional police, Chief Bjelosivic, at the headquarters of the Ministry of Interior Special Police Unit. Grady was unaware Bjelosivic had already tried but failed to take over the main police station and was now completely discredited in the eyes of nearly all of the RS police officers. Bjelosivic told Grady only that there was nothing he could do. Two hours later, the frightened

Bjelosivic fled Brcko for the safety of Camp McGovern. After his departure, Grady's subsequent efforts to rally the RS police also failed because the few pro-Plavsic officers who remained in Brcko were too frightened to intervene.<sup>14</sup>

By midmorning, the mood in Brcko had turned ugly. Shops were shuttered. Angry people roamed the streets. Truckloads of shouting men, some carrying Karadzic posters, roared around town. Roving mobs smashed cars belonging to international agencies. In incendiary broadcasts over the local radio station, Serb authorities accused the United States of assisting in the takeover of the police station and called for the townspeople to oppose the action. Speaking over Radio Pale, Momcilo Krajisnik, the Serb member of the tripartite Bosnian presidency,<sup>15</sup> congratulated the mob, saying, “I hope you will repeat this feat a hundred times.” A Serb Orthodox priest broadcast an appeal for those who housed UN personnel to throw them out. The broadcasts also falsely accused SFOR troops of wounding four civilians and killing local people. The broadcasts continued until General David Grange, the commander of MND-North, ordered a helicopter to direct its downdraft at the station's antenna and blow it down.<sup>16</sup>

Grady drove into the town convinced that the demonstrators were highly disciplined and under instructions to frighten representatives of international agencies and destroy their property, but not to directly harm them. To prove the point, Grady, in uniform and accompanied by his female interpreter, left his UN vehicle and walked into a crowd of demonstrators. His UN vehicle was overturned and burned, but Grady and his assistant were virtually ignored. At about the same time, a small group of IPTF officers outside of Brcko had a similar experience. The officers were pursued by a rock-throwing mob, which stopped abruptly and allowed them to escape to the safety of an SFOR vehicle.<sup>17</sup>

## THE POLICE STATION

The apparent order not to harm unarmed IPTF officers and other foreign civilians did not apply to SFOR. At 4:30 A.M., SFOR

troops from “Team Dog” were already manning observation posts and blocking positions in and around Brcko to prevent the movement of rifles into the city and to support the scheduled IPTF inspection of the local police station. A platoon of U.S. soldiers had fortified their position in front of the main police station with concertina wire as they confronted a hostile mob with women and children in the front ranks and men at the rear. The rioters were armed with brick-size stones and timbers taken from the rubble of war-damaged buildings. The mob threatened the soldiers with clubs and mimed how they would kill them with pistols and knives. They attacked the troops in waves, with women and children throwing stones and men and youths swinging clubs and fists. The struggle lasted until midmorning.<sup>18</sup>

The Americans at the police station, led by Sergeant First Class Phillip Burgess, were members of D Company, Second Battalion, Second Infantry Regiment, First Infantry Division. Burgess and his troops were quickly cut off by the mob from the U.S. soldiers who were guarding the Brcko Bridge. D Company held its position at the police station until about 10:00 A.M., when it was “pretty much overwhelmed.”<sup>19</sup> Demonstrators used their bare hands to tear down the barbed wire protecting the troops. Burgess was hit by a club and suffered a cut that closed his left eye. Another soldier, Sergeant Matthew Martin, was more seriously injured when the three-man crew of his Bradley fighting vehicle was besieged by the mob, which put steel pipes in the treads to prevent it from moving. When Martin emerged in an attempt to reason with the crowd, he was struck in the face with a board and suffered a broken nose and damage to his eye. With his position becoming increasingly untenable and Martin needing medical attention, Sergeant Burgess led his platoon away from the police station to a position south of town, where Martin was picked up by vehicles from Camp McGovern for medical evacuation to Germany.<sup>20</sup>

During the confrontation, a seventeen-year-old Bosnian Serb high school student, Mladen Pajic, was shot in the thigh when a U.S. soldier fired his sidearm into the pavement and the bullet ricocheted. The boy’s brother said: “They didn’t shoot

right at the people. I guess that is not allowed.”<sup>21</sup> The soldiers at the station had authority to use force to disperse the crowds but were not willing to use their weapons against unarmed demonstrators. For their restraint and discipline, eighteen soldiers received medals and other commendations.

## EVACUATION OF THE IPTF

From midmorning, the remainder of Grady’s day was spent in a running debate with IPTF Sarajevo on whether to evacuate IPTF officers and other internationals from their homes in Brcko. Grady believed people were safer in their homes. Sarajevo disagreed. Trapped by hostile crowds and afraid for their lives, IPTF officers were telephoning Sarajevo and demanding to be rescued. At 1:00 P.M., IPTF Sarajevo ordered an evacuation of all IPTF and other internationals to Camp McGovern. Grady could not reach people in the town, but he devised a plan to evacuate the thirty officers at the IPTF station.<sup>22</sup> One group of SFOR armored personnel carriers (APCs) under the command of Army Second Lieutenant William White of D Company created a diversion by driving away from the station with the crowd in pursuit, as another group of vehicles arrived at the front of the IPTF station from the opposite direction. As the IPTF officers ran to the APCs, the mob ran back to attack the vehicles with rocks. Several officers suffered bruises, but there were no serious injuries. Lt. White was decorated for bravery. Once the IPTF station was unoccupied, it was quickly overrun and completely trashed by the mob. Equipment and furnishings were looted or destroyed and offices were vandalized. The station was a total loss.<sup>23</sup>

After arriving at Camp McGovern, Grady began to work with SFOR to evacuate the eighty-five IPTF officers who remained trapped in Brcko. The rescue operation involved many acts of individual heroism by U.S. forces. Among the most daring was an action conducted by four members of a U.S. Army Force Protection Team from Camp McGovern. The mission began when a German IPTF officer assigned to McGovern received a

call for help from two British and four Indian IPTF officers whose residence in Brcko was besieged by a mob. In response, the team, all volunteers, donned civilian clothes and borrowed a van from a local merchant who ran a shop on the military base. The team removed the van's license plates and painted Cyrillic letters on the side to make it look like a local vehicle. With a chief warrant officer at the wheel, a U.S. soldier who spoke the local language along as an interpreter, and the German IPTF officer and his radio, the team, armed and "locked and loaded," left McGovern for Brcko. Their first challenge was to explain their way past an SFOR checkpoint outside the town. Their next encounter was with a group of Serbs armed with pipes and clubs who blocked the road and ordered them out of the van. When the driver refused, one Serb swung a pipe at the windshield but missed as the vehicle lurched forward and sped away, traveling by back roads to reach the IPTF officers' residence.<sup>24</sup>

The team found the house surrounded by an angry crowd. The van drove on for a block and then made a U-turn in front of a large, walled compound before heading back up the street to the residence. At that point, the team became aware of a U.S. Army Apache helicopter gunship hovering above them. Having been told before leaving McGovern that U.S. forces in Brcko were alerted to their mission, the team assumed the gunship was there to protect them. They did not know the helicopter crew was unaware of the mission and was reporting that an unmarked van full of armed Serbs had just turned in front of an arms depot housing interned Serb heavy weapons and ammunition. Back at the residence, the team first noticed a Serb woman standing on the porch, brandishing an AK-47. Their initial thought was that she posed a threat to the IPTF officers, who were looking out the windows. In fact, the woman was the IPTF officers' landlady, and she was protecting her rent-paying boarders. Using the German IPTF officer's radio, the team tried to get the IPTF officers to come out to the van. When this tactic failed, two members of the team left the vehicle and began waving and motioning the officers to leave the residence.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, the helicopter arrived overhead. Again the

team assumed the gunship had moved in to protect them. Instead, the helicopter crew was in radio contact with Camp McGovern, requesting permission to fire on the van if its armed passengers endangered the IPTF officers in the house. Fortunately, the helicopter’s noise and downward prop wash created a momentary diversion that enabled the IPTF officers to reach the van, which sped off. At this point, McGovern warned the helicopter to be on the lookout for a U.S. team in a “blue” van. The gunship answered that the van below them was “gray” and was heading toward the U.S. military base. Aboard the van, the U.S. team was joking with the rescued British and Indian policemen when they spotted a heavily armed, rapid reaction force from McGovern that had been sent to intercept them. Having left the base with their weapons but without identification, the team was disarmed and held under guard until their commanding officer was brought to the roadblock to identify them. Once back in uniform, the team received a hero’s welcome at the base and military commendations for bravery.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these efforts, seventy-five to eighty IPTF officers remained trapped in the town and at risk of assault by gangs of increasingly intoxicated Serb thugs. Under a plan devised by Chief Grady, the remaining IPTF officers were told to slip away from their residences after dark and make their way to a few predesignated roads, where they would be picked up by SFOR vehicles. The plan misfired when the evacuees were given the wrong time and began arriving at the pickup points before the rescue vehicles had left Camp McGovern. Eventually, the recovery effort went forward, concluding at 3:30 A.M. with the safe recovery of the last IPTF officer from Brcko—twenty-three hours after the rent-a-mob arrived.<sup>27</sup>

## THE BRCKO BRIDGE

As various SFOR platoons were attacked and overrun by crowds of up to eight hundred rioters, they fell back toward the SFOR fixed position guarding the bridge across the Sava River. SFOR’s principal lifeline to Croatia and its supply base in Hungary, the

Brcko Bridge was regularly guarded by a company of American SFOR troops from the U.S. Army's First Mechanized Infantry Division. The troops were barricaded behind sandbags and supported by an Abrams M-1 tank and two Bradley fighting vehicles. They were armed with M-16 automatic rifles, grenades, and sidearms. Facing them was a hostile mob of civilians, including large numbers of women and children. For nearly twelve hours, hostile Serbs armed with bricks, railroad ties, and Molotov cocktails assaulted the bridge's defenders. The mob made repeated advances, pelting the soldiers with rocks and bricks. Rioters attempted to penetrate the wire barrier and to climb onto and damage military vehicles. As the troops were under orders not to fire, they used their rifles to push back the crowd, but the fighting was often hand-to-hand. There were fistfights. Troops grabbed rioters and pushed them back into the crowd. Serb men used railroad ties to damage vehicles and to injure soldiers, who lost their footing and fell to the ground.<sup>28</sup>

As the day wore on, the U.S. commander, Captain Kevin Hendricks, began to rotate his men to the Croatian side, where they were able to rest, eat, and recuperate out of sight of the struggle for control of the bridge. He also began to use a careful, graduated escalation of warning shots—from pistols to rifles to machine guns—in an attempt to deter the crowd. Specific soldiers were assigned this responsibility, ordered when to fire, and instructed to aim at targets that could be hit without endangering the rioters. This tactic had no apparent effect until the soldiers fired a heavy machine gun that tore away the facade of an abandoned building. This display of firepower dissuaded the crowd, which drew back and limited its further attack to stones and Molotov cocktails.<sup>29</sup> Finally, when a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a military vehicle, the troops lost patience and fired tear gas, the first time this chemical agent was used in Bosnia. Tear gas was also dropped from a hovering helicopter.<sup>30</sup>

At 7:30 P.M., Momcilo Krajisnik, the Serb member of the Bosnian presidency, and Dragan Kalinic, speaker of the RS People's Assembly, arrived in Brcko in an impressive motorcade of black limousines. They stopped at the mayor's office, which

was located adjacent to the Brcko Bridge, and went inside for a meeting with local officials.<sup>31</sup> At the conclusion of the meeting, Krajisnik emerged and stood on a vehicle to address the crowd that had been attacking the bridge. Krajisnik praised the demonstrators for their actions and for their sacrifices in defense of the Serbian people. Almost as suddenly as the violence at the bridge started, it was over. Krajisnik's speech, exhaustion, and the coming of darkness quieted the rioters. A few hours later, General Grange convened a meeting at Camp McGovern attended by Colonel James Greer, commander of the "Steel Tigers," Task Force 1-77 Armor; Farrand; Grady; the mayor of Brcko; the new acting police chief; and the local SDS party boss to discuss restoring public order.<sup>32</sup>

In Sarajevo, August 28 was the first day in office for the new United States ambassador to Bosnia, Richard D. Kauzlarich. Having arrived in Sarajevo the previous afternoon, Kauzlarich was informed of the situation in Brcko as he prepared for his first meeting with the Bosnian foreign minister and the formal presentation of his credentials to the Bosnian and Croat members of the tripartite Bosnian presidency. Kauzlarich and his staff were in the process of preparing for a previously scheduled visit on August 30 from the U.S. special Balkan envoy, Ambassador Robert Gelbard, and the NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), General Wesley Clark. The new ambassador's immediate concern was for the safety of Americans in Brcko, particularly U.S. military forces and members of the American contingent of the IPTF. Kauzlarich presented his credentials at 11 A.M. The Serb member of the presidency, Momcilo Krajisnik, did not attend the presentation, in keeping with his policy of visiting Sarajevo only for formal meetings of the joint presidency.<sup>33</sup>

In the afternoon, Kauzlarich received a telephone call from Farrand, who briefed the ambassador on the situation in Brcko. Farrand was also concerned about the safety of the Americans, particularly those in the IPTF. By the time of the call, however, Farrand seemed comfortable that most Americans had already arrived safely at Camp McGovern. Farrand told the ambassador

he was certain the riot was orchestrated by Serb hard-liners in Pale. Kauzlarich's day concluded with a meeting with a U.S. congressional delegation composed of members of the House of Representatives and led by Missouri Democrat Ike Skelton. In their meeting, the congressional delegation made clear to the ambassador their opposition to continuing U.S. troop presence in Bosnia. They also made clear they did not want U.S. troops placed in dangerous situations, such as pursuing war criminals, or subjected to the kind of risks they were experiencing at that moment in Brcko.<sup>34</sup>

In Washington, the retiring chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili, held his farewell press conference on August 28. The general played down the Brcko incident, telling reporters the police chiefs in four Bosnian Serb towns had changed allegiance to Mrs. Plavsic, and the UN IPTF had gone there to begin the process of police reform. He noted that things had gone smoothly in all the towns but Brcko, "where some hard-liners had resisted, moving in busloads of supporters and agitating." Shalikashvili said, "Some elements (peacekeepers) got caught up in the middle of a demonstration, which got pretty heated."<sup>35</sup> White House Deputy Press Secretary Joe Lockhart took a stronger line. Speaking from the president's vacation retreat at Martha's Vineyard, Lockhart said the U.S. "will hold the parties' leadership responsible for keeping their people under control."<sup>36</sup>

On August 30, Ambassador Gelbard, the U.S. special representative for implementation of the Dayton Accords, arrived in Sarajevo and delivered a blunt warning to Krajisnik and other hard-line Serbs during a visit to their headquarters in nearby Pale. Speaking to a Krajisnik aide, Gelbard accused the hard-liners of instigating the violence in Brcko and of "incredible cowardice in using women and children as shields" during the violence. Gelbard warned that continued opposition of Dayton implementation would not be tolerated, and any repetition of events in Brcko would have "the most serious consequences imaginable."<sup>37</sup> Gelbard's tough message was reinforced by a warning from General Clark: peacekeeping troops in Bosnia would use

deadly force, if necessary, to deal with future mob violence and to protect U.S. forces.<sup>38</sup> Clark's statement was made in accordance with guidance received from U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen to not "let our troops be forced off the field of battle."<sup>39</sup> On September 3, Defense Department officials announced that an additional eighteen F-16 fighters based in Aviana, Italy would patrol the skies over Bosnia to act as a deterrent to those who might foment violence or attempt to disrupt the September elections.<sup>40</sup>

On September 2 in Brcko, the Principal Deputy High Representative, Ambassador Jacques Klein, and Task Force Eagle's commander, General Grange, appeared with Brcko Supervisor Robert Farrand at a media conference to demonstrate the international community's support for Farrand and the Dayton process. Klein said it was clear that the August 28 riot was "orchestrated from elsewhere." The "conductors," Klein said, were the same leaders who had led the Serbs into "cul-de-sacs" that were not in their interest. He said the international community was evenhanded, but that it would help those who supported democracy and the Dayton process. Klein's remarks were echoed by Farrand, who said the August 28 event was part of a deliberate plan to use violence to discredit the international community, particularly SFOR and the IPTF. As evidence that the violence had been orchestrated, Farrand cited the sirens that signaled the start of the riot and the fact that the mobs at every location made the same demands. Farrand said the citizens of Brcko were ashamed of the violence and embarrassed that Serbs were responsible for the disturbance. He said the international community knew who was responsible and would "keep the spotlight of accountability on those authorities."<sup>41</sup> General Grange condemned the local Brcko police for not attempting to control the riot and said that it appeared that the police, in conjunction with the local radio station, had incited the violence. Grange praised the performance of his soldiers, saying they had shown heroic restraint in the face of "insults and cowardice."<sup>42</sup>

On September 6, U.S. forces withdrew from the Brcko Bridge, believing they could do a better job of providing security

## Bosnia and Herzegovina



Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas

for the town by active patrolling rather than guarding fixed positions. While tactically correct, the withdrawal was a political disaster. It created the impression that the Serb mob had achieved its objective of intimidating and driving away the American soldiers. International civilian administrators in Bosnia and the media criticized SFOR for sending a message of weakness by abandoning its position in the face of Serb pressure just prior to September's municipal elections.<sup>43</sup>

## STATUS OF BRCKO

Behind the bold facade of official statements, the Brcko incident left the Clinton administration and U.S. military leaders with a bad case of the jitters. The decision by SFOR to help President Plavsic's supporters seize police stations and television transmitters was the boldest move by NATO in the nineteen months since the beginning of the peace process. The fact that pro-Karadzic forces were able to quickly organize a mob assault on American troops in Brcko sent a political message and raised the specter of U.S. casualties with the attendant possible loss of U.S. congressional and public support. U.S. concerns focused on two principal issues. The first was Brcko.

Prior to the Bosnian conflict, Brcko was one of Yugoslavia's most prosperous communities. Its location near the Zagreb-Belgrade highway and its port on the Sava River, the largest river port in Bosnia, made it an important trading center. The town and its suburbs covered about a fifth of Brcko municipality. It had a multiethnic population of forty-one thousand people, 55 percent Moslem, 19 percent Serb, and 7 percent Croat. In April 1992, a Serb militia had occupied Brcko, killing or driving out the non-Serb inhabitants and destroying their homes. Hundreds of ethnic Croats and Moslems were herded into a bus company barn, where they were systematically tortured and executed. Following the ethnic cleansing, the town was inhabited entirely by Serbs.<sup>44</sup>

At Dayton, the status of Brcko was not resolved. Under the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>45</sup> the division of territory between the Croat-Moslem Federation and the Republika Srpska made Brcko the geographic lynchpin of the peace process. Brcko's location astride the five-kilometer-wide Posavina Corridor connecting the eastern and western parts of Bosnian Serb territory controlled the road, rail, and river routes linking the RS capital of Banja Luka with the Serb hard-liner's stronghold of Pale. Its position also gave it control of the north-south lines of communication linking the industrial city of Tuzla in the Bosnian Federation with the river port and bridge over the Sava River

to Croatia and the rest of Europe. With all parties demanding control of this strategic location, a compromise was reached: Brcko would remain under the control of Serb authorities while its final status was decided by international binding arbitration. The status of Brcko was to be determined one year after the signing of the agreement (originally December 1996) by an arbitration tribunal composed of three members: an ethnic Serb, Dr. Vitomir Popovic; an ethnic Moslem, Professor Cazim Sadikovic; and the presiding arbitrator, American lawyer Roberts Owen.<sup>46</sup> The Dayton Accords stated that “the Parties agree to binding arbitration of the disputed portion of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line in the Brcko area indicated on the map attached at the Appendix.” In an apparent oversight, the map was omitted. As a result, not only the status of Brcko needed to be determined, but also the extent of the area subject to arbitration.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the first year after Dayton, the pressure on the arbitration tribunal mounted. The federation’s argument was that Brcko should be returned to its original Moslem and Croat inhabitants. The Serbs responded that if Brcko were given to the federation, the RS would be divided and effectively destroyed. Brcko’s proximity to the “Arizona” market, a flourishing free-trade zone located in the Zone of Separation between the RS and the Bosnian Federation, gave it additional postwar prominence. After Dayton, Serb authorities in Pale attempted to reinforce their claim on Brcko by relocating displaced persons to the town. In March 1996, the Serbs conducted a form of ethnic “self-cleansing” during the transfer of the Sarajevo suburbs to control of the federation. Some ten thousand ethnic Serbs were brought from Sarajevo to Brcko to join other Serbs relocated during the conflict.<sup>48</sup> Over all, two-thirds of Brcko’s Serb population was composed of displaced people from other areas. Against this background, the arbitration tribunal met in February 1997, but it was unable to reach a decision. It did, however, call for the appointment of an International Supervisor for Brcko and the deployment of a UN IPTF contingent to monitor the local Serb police. As the Bosnian members of the arbi-

tration tribunal would continue to cancel each other's vote, it became clear the decision rested with Owen and, in a larger sense, with the United States.

As the new International Supervisor for Brcko, Farrand was directly subordinate to the High Representative, the senior civilian official responsible for peace implementation in Bosnia. His mandate was to restore the city's pre-war, multiethnic character by facilitating the return of former residents. During the conflict, Brcko's suburbs were reduced to bombed-out houses and mine fields. Starting in the summer of 1997, Farrand began the difficult task of rebuilding houses and encouraging the return of the original residents. Farrand's actions generated high-level attention from the U.S. government. In June 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Brcko to reopen the bridge over the Sava River. In a warning to the hard-line Serbs who still controlled the town's government, Albright said a price would be paid for the atrocities that had been committed. Brcko was a ward of the international community, but it had an American protector. Located in the American sector with its American administrator and American arbitrator, Brcko was seen as an American problem. The Serb mob action in Brcko was a direct challenge to the United States.

The second issue of concern to U.S. policymakers was the American military force structure in Bosnia. Designed to intimidate and, if necessary, quickly defeat Serb military forces, the U.S. contingents in the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) and the follow-on Stability Force were built around heavy armored divisions, supported by helicopter gunships and airpower. Following the entry of IFOR into Bosnia in January 1996, the military tasks assigned in Annex I of the Dayton Accords were quickly accomplished. These tasks included supervising the separation of opposing military forces, cantonment of heavy weapons, monitoring the Zone of Separation between the entities, and assuring a safe and secure environment. To accommodate those who wanted NATO to play a larger role, the Dayton Accords included a formula under which IFOR would have the authority to assist with civilian implementation, but its obligations were limited to the military

requirements in the accords. Completion of the assigned military tasks did not lead to a military withdrawal. Instead, NATO was increasingly drawn into assisting with the implementation of the civilian aspects of the peace process.<sup>49</sup>

Under Dayton, the Office of the High Representative was responsible for civilian implementation. Its authority, however, was limited to offering guidance to the various international organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and bilateral donors involved in postconflict state building. OHR could coordinate but not direct the reconstruction effort. There also was no requirement in the accords for cooperation between NATO and the High Representative. NATO resisted the pressure to become involved in civilian implementation, particularly the need to perform police functions. In March 1996, during the transfer of the Sarajevo suburbs, NATO troops did not intervene to prevent Serb militants from torching buildings, destroying property, and forcing the evacuation of Serb residents. It was also clearly understood that the primary task for U.S. elements in IFOR was “force protection,” or the use of all means necessary to avoid casualties. U.S. military forces generally remained within their fortified bases, venturing out only in armored convoys with troops swathed in Kevlar. This policy severely restricted the ability of American troops to interact with civilians and to engage in activities related to postconflict reconstruction.<sup>50</sup>

In the aftermath of August 28, it was clear that the mob action in Brcko was an asymmetrical response by Serb hard-liners to the heavy armored forces of SFOR. Serb leaders knew they could never challenge SFOR militarily. They also knew SFOR soldiers would not harm civilians. The Serbs had observed the progress of the intifada in Israel and noted the success of mob warfare against conventional forces. The mob in Brcko was not a spontaneous gathering of people with a complaint. In fact, many people subsequently admitted they were paid one hundred deutsche marks to participate. The mob was armed with clubs, stones, and Molotov cocktails that were used to set vehicles on fire. They were highly disciplined and responsive to

instructions from demonstration organizers. A group of several hundred would mass and intensively attack a small group of soldiers. They would then fall back, rest, and eat before going back on the offensive in response to new instructions. By attacking in waves over a prolonged period, they were able to wear down the troops and eventually force them off their positions.<sup>51</sup>

For SFOR, the Brcko incident came as a surprise. No pre-planning had been done to deal with such a challenge. After August 28, it was clear to the new SFOR commander, General Eric K. Shinseki, that the U.S. military had faced an enemy in Brcko that it was ill prepared to fight. Tanks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopter gunships were of little use against hostile mobs of women and children providing cover for drunken, club-wielding thugs who threw stones and Molotov cocktails. U.S. military attention focused on the confrontation on the bridge, where American soldiers were pinned down by a hail of rocks and bottles. Although heavily armed, the U.S. troops were not trained or equipped to confront a violent mob. Regular infantry guarding fixed positions with automatic weapons, fixed bayonets, and machine guns were also at a disadvantage against crowds that rampaged at will. Fortunately, the soldiers had performed admirably and had not lost their composure under extreme provocation—despite taking casualties. This was not the enemy U.S. troops had been trained to fight. SFOR command understood the necessity for supporting civilian implementation and the need for continuing to support President Plavsic. Unable to confront the United States with conventional military forces, Serb hard-liners appeared to have found a way to turn American heavy weapons and respect for human rights into liabilities. In pursuit of their goal of obstructing Dayton implementation, they had found a means to embarrass the U.S. and the international community.<sup>52</sup>

## THE U.S. REACTION

In response to the incident in Brcko, the Pentagon's first reaction was to look for a quick fix by using new technology. On September 3, the Pentagon announced that U.S. troops in

Bosnia would be equipped with sponge grenades and dye-filled balloons for use against unruly Bosnians. The sponge grenades were 40 mm projectiles fired from grenade launchers that were designed to knock people down but not cause serious injury. The balloons were filled with latex paint and could be thrown by soldiers to mark ringleaders and violent militants for later arrest. Some balloons contained special ink visible only under a black light. According to a Pentagon spokesman, the nonlethal weapons were not intended to move U.S. troops into the role of international police, but to give them a broader range of options.<sup>53</sup>

At the time, the United States was also at work on more esoteric nonlethal weapons. These included special devices that incapacitated rioters with low-frequency sound waves and by covering them with glue. Among the weapons under development was a “net gun” that fired a chemical that turned into a sticky net that entangled human targets. There were stun guns that knocked targets unconscious for several minutes but did not cause serious harm. U.S. forces had experimented with a “slime,” or foam, gun that emitted a stream of sticky chemical that would “glue” attackers to the ground. There were also tests of acoustic weapons that made internal organs vibrate, causing disabling diarrhea or vertigo that would render them unable to move.<sup>54</sup>

Simply equipping infantry and armored forces with a range of nonlethal weapons, however, was not the answer. Pentagon officials knew that technology, no matter how imaginative, was no substitute for international security forces with the proper training and equipment to handle civil disorder. Such forces would need to be highly mobile and to have effective communications that would enable them to respond quickly to areas threatened by mob violence. They would require the ability to interact effectively with civilians, especially as they would be dealing with representatives of newly elected municipal governments following the September elections. To avoid exacerbating tensions, these security forces would need to be trained to use the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve their objectives. They would need experience in dealing with civil dis-

order, especially demonstrations organized by nationalistic, corrupt, political elites and their allies, the organized criminal enterprises that controlled many Bosnian communities. As such groups were supported by the remnants of former secret security services, international forces would also require the capacity to defend themselves against armed groups, if required.

Such highly capable forces existed, but not in the U.S. inventory, and not in Bosnia. So-called "constabulary forces," mobile forces with the capacity to perform both police and military functions, were, however, part of the force structure of many of America's European allies. None had been deployed to Bosnia as part of the NATO military force, but individual gendarmes were serving as unarmed police monitors with the IPTF. Constabulary forces were, however, in short supply. In most European countries, they were assigned civilian police functions in peacetime and were fully engaged with domestic police duties. The challenge facing U.S. officials was to convince European members of NATO of the wisdom and the necessity of assigning such forces to Bosnia, where they would certainly face potentially dangerous confrontations. The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which served in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995, included seven hundred UN civilian police monitors with significant contingents from European countries. Some of these European officers were taken hostage and used as human shields or otherwise humiliated by all factions.<sup>55</sup> Europeans clearly recalled these bitter experiences and did not want them repeated. To convince European governments to commit police constabulary units to deal with future mob actions like the incident in Brcko was going to be a hard sell.

Finding European contributors to a new multinational police force was especially difficult because it was generally expected that Bosnia was headed for a time of widespread civil disorder. The September municipal elections allowed minority representatives to seek election to municipal councils regardless of their current residence. Successful candidates would have to return to their hometowns, however, to assume office. This process of seating minority officials in towns across Bosnia was

likely to touch off widespread violence that would directly challenge SFOR. The process of political reintegration also was expected to encourage the widespread return of refugees and displaced persons to their home communities. Given the violence that had resulted from relatively limited attempts at refugee return, it was generally believed the spring of 1998 would be a period of renewed ethnic tensions, with the potential of reigniting a general conflict. This period of potential violence was also the period in which NATO would have to implement its decision on whether to extend its presence in Bosnia beyond the June 1998 expiration date for SFOR's mandate—a decision largely dependent upon whether American troops would remain in Bosnia despite President Clinton's repeated statements that they would be out by the June deadline. It was unlikely European governments would volunteer their own forces for hazardous duty in Bosnia if it appeared the United States was preparing to withdraw.