

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MARSHALL FREEMAN HARRIS

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Initial interview date: August 1993
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INTERVIEW

[Note: This transcript was not edited by Mr. Harris.]

Q: I used to work in the Foreign Service, where I found a great desire to accommodate. How did that apply in your case? Where you officially pressured to change your views? Why did you leave the Foreign Service?

HARRIS: I did not feel any pressure to change my views. I believe that I, as well as almost all of us at the working level, who were involved in the conduct of Yugoslav policy, disagreed with it. Our views were very well known. We were quite open about our opposition. We had adequate access to senior officials which we used to express our views. we were never pressured to change those views.

Q: What were the group dynamics? The newspapers reported that you and others met to discuss what to do.

HARRIS: That may have been true of John Western and Steven Walker, but not me. I never discussed the possibility of my resignation with them or with anyone else in my immediate office. I had three or four close Foreign Service friends with whom I discussed that possibility, but I did not share my thoughts about my future with the people I worked with. My friends did give me their advise and it was what you might expect. They asked whether I was sure I wanted to resign. They pointed out that it was a very definitive act; they wondered whether I should not consider requesting reassignment. They asked why I should be taking such a drastic step. They were aware of my strong views about our policy and were not surprised when I gave somewhat perfunctory answers to the questions they raised. Once they assured of the strength of my convictions, they were very encouraging and agreed that if I felt so strongly, that I should proceed in my course.

Q: How long did you consider the question of resignation?

HARRIS: My first real thought about it came in June, 1993. The situation in Bosnia was continuing to deteriorate. As an alternative to a stronger policy, we had decided to go along with the European countries and create "safe" areas in Bosnia. However, nothing was done to implement that policy either. The signatories of the "Joint Action Program" of May 22, were not putting any troops into the region. It was as if just another series of U.N. Security Council resolutions had been passed--pious words, but no action. We claimed that our policy toward Bosnia had to be multi-lateral--e.g. any action had to be taken in conjunction with our allies, but nothing was happening.

I reached a new low point on July 20 or 21 when Secretary Christopher had a news conference before his Tokyo trip. During the course of that interview, he claimed that we--the U.S.--were doing all we could consistent with our national interests. This was at a time when the situation in Sarajevo was worst than it had been at any time during the

previous seventeen months of siege. People were on the brink of starvation; they had almost no water, electricity, natural gas or any other fuel--even wood--to cook with. I thought that if we couldn't respond to such an inhumane situation, if the Secretary of State of the United States was taking such a passive tack in the face of such a dire situation, then there would be very little that would prompt the policy makers to change course.

After that, when the Administration announced a slightly more vigorous policy by threatening to launch an air strike to lift the Sarajevo siege, I had a hard time becoming enthused; I could not convince myself that such strikes would actually ever be launched. I thought that even if raids were initiated, they would be of such a limited character that they could not address the core of the Bosnian problem which was rampant Serb aggression.

The last straw came at the end of July when I realized that the threatened air strikes had the intended purpose of putting pressure on the Bosnian government to accept a partition settlement in Geneva. We were in fact telling the Bosniacs that we would be prepared to launch the strikes against Serb positions, but only to improve the humanitarian situation in Sarajevo and possibly in some other locales. The strikes were not intended to roll back the Serb territorial gains. The Bosnian government was told that it should seize this opportunity to get the best deal it could in Geneva.

Q: How openly was the Bosnian situation discussed in the Department? What was said for public consumption to the competing parties in Bosnia and what were the State officers saying? Was it ever made clear what was said for public consumption and what was the real policy?

HARRIS: I don't think the distinction was ever made. I think that people at the policy making level didn't necessarily see any inconsistency or disconnect between what was happening "on the ground" in Bosnia and the policy they were espousing. They thought the policy of pressuring the Bosniacs completely reasonable. We, at the working level, considered that policy simply awful in every sense of the word. We were certain that the suffering in Sarajevo and elsewhere in Bosnia would continue and that Serb aggression would be ratified. Even worst, we thought that some of the fundamental principles which had provided the underpinnings to our foreign policy since the end of World War II--e.g. the U.N. Charter, the sanctity of international borders, territorial integrity, the right of national self-defense--were being abandoned by the Clinton administration.

Q: At what level was policy being made? The desk officer usually has great influence, but that doesn't seem to have been the case in this situation. Was it the Assistant Secretary or higher in the Department or at the White House?

HARRIS: Policy is made in different ways depending on the situation. What ever policy decision on Bosnia had in common was that it was reactive. We didn't have a cogent policy; we didn't really have a world view. No one had apparently really sat down and considered what our national interests were at stake in Bosnia, because if they had, I am

certain they would have had to develop a different policy. Sometimes, policy initiatives came from the desk, but they were also reactive as in the case of Srebrenica when that city was surrounded in April by Serbs who kept tightening the noose around the city. I wrote an "options" paper in which I tried to lay out ever military and non-military measure that we could employ to ease the suffering of the Bosnians. Each option had a commentary on the pros and cons. I did the same thing when the Sarajevo situation deteriorated so badly, probably in early July.

At other times, the initiative came from the highest level as in the case of the joint action program announced on May 22. You will recall that we, Great Britain, Russia, France and Spain--which was at the time occupying the chairmanship of the U.S. Security Council--got together then and agreed on some points and a strategy which highlighted the "safe area" concept. That development was initiated by the European Foreign Ministers and by Secretary Christopher, with the possible participation of Tony Lake and the NSC staff and Steve Oxman, the Assistant Secretary for European Affairs.

Q: When were you first assigned to the Bosnian desk?

HARRIS: It was February, 1993. I was assigned as a political officer, although I belonged to the administrative "cone". My first assignment in the Foreign Service was London as consular officer and staff assistant to the administrative Minister-Counselor. Then I returned to Washington for Bulgarian language training and area studies, after which I went to Sofia as the General Services officer. Later I became a political officer there. At the end of 1990, I returned to the Department for a six months stint in the Operations Center. Then I worked in the Secretariat doing advance work for Secretary Baker for another six months. From the beginning of 1992 until August, 1992, I was a special assistant to Secretary Baker. After he resigned, I went to Macedonia for three or four months as a CSCE monitor as part of what was called the "spill over" mission which was established to try to prevent any spread of the Bosnian conflict into that part of the former Yugoslavia. Then it was back briefly to the Secretariat staff, where I was assigned to advance Secretary Christopher's trip to Damascus. After that brief chore, I was assigned to the Bosnian desk.

Q: Tell us a little about coordination with Defense, CIA and other government agencies on implementation of U.S. policy.

HARRIS: At higher levels, there was a lot of consultation and coordination. At my level and even at the office director level, I don't think there was a great deal of substantive cooperation. We had a daily teleconference of the office directors or deputy assistant secretaries in the various agencies--State, DOD, JCS, OSD and NSC. I think CIA was also included, although I can't be certain because I attended only one of these conferences. I gather that the agency representatives used these meetings to talk through policy issues or to exchange information about what was going on in Bosnia, but I don't think any significant decision were ever made in those meetings. It was more a matter of

information exchange and discussion about what had been passed on to these officials from their bosses.

Q: How effective were the people you were dealing with? Did they really know what was going on in Bosnia? Did they know the history of this centuries old conflict? Gary Sick, in his book on the Iranian revolution, says that people in Washington and in other capitals, didn't really understand the history of the entity they were dealing with.

HARRIS: I think that was also true in the case of our Bosnian policy, but in an unusual manner. The policy makers tried to portray the conflict in Bosnia as just another event in a long history of ancient ethnic rivalries and hatreds. They saw it essentially as a civil war that had been going on for hundreds of years. They saw it as all being against all in Bosnia. That was their little foray into history; it was unfortunately inaccurate. Beyond that, the Bosnia policy makers in the Clinton administration have no background in the region or in the history of the region. In comparison, the Bush administration, which unfortunately reached the conclusion that we had no real interests in Bosnia and that therefore we should not become involved--a decision that was reached for very cynical domestic political reasons in an election year--the Secretary of State, who had been the Deputy Secretary, was Lawrence Eagleburger. He had served in Serbia and had spent a significant part of his career involved in or following closely the events in the Balkans. Under Eagleburger, you had Assistant Secretary for European Affairs Tom Niles who had also served in Serbia and in the Soviet Union and therefore knew the Balkans very well. The National Security Advisor was Brent Scowcroft who had also served in Belgrade as a Defense Attaché and who had also followed Balkans events closely.

In the Clinton administration, the Secretary of State spent four years as Deputy Secretary, which is usually not a policy making position or is out of the policy making loop. The rest of Christopher's career was devoted to the law and I doubt whether he ever became deeply involved in the Balkans. The Assistant Secretary for European Affairs is Steve Oxman who to my knowledge has not ever been in the region, much less having studied it. The list goes on and on. The special envoy to the peace negotiations in Geneva is Reginald Bartholomew who, while having the reputation for being an excellent diplomat and negotiator, was in the region only once, in April, 1993; he has no professional background in Eastern European affairs.

The professional Foreign Service officers, who are knowledgeable are advising the policy makers to a certain extent, but their views are largely ignored. No matter how open the doors of the political appointees are, the Foreign Service is not going to rush in every day with memoranda and policy papers saying that it disagrees with what the administration is doing. The career Service was largely in favor of a change of policy and was consistently pointing out the disadvantages of carrying on the course that the Clinton administration was taking. The Service's views were to no avail. The discussions were always very pleasant and polite and conducted through prescribed channels, but the comments of the career Service, I think, rolled off the backs of the policy makers.

Q: INR gives weekly briefings to a variety of State officials, including Assistant Secretaries. Did they ignore the reports on Bosnia?

HARRIS: I think so. I guess that the root problem really was that the Clinton administration viewed foreign policy in general as an extension or adjunct to its domestic policy. It did not treat foreign policy on its own merits. That was especially true in the case of Bosnia where the overwhelming concern of the policy makers was whether that situation would take up all the headlines and the news and whether we would be embroiled or dragged into a conflict that we would prefer to stay out of. The concern, I think, was that our involvement might somehow jeopardize Hillary Clinton's health care package or the budget bill. That is no way to view foreign policy. Foreign policy is a subject matter that stands on its own feet. But this administration treats it as a secondary manner, which it is not. My comment goes beyond Bosnia, although that is at the moment the most important foreign policy issue facing the country.

Q: How much Congressional interest was there? How was it manifested? Did you receive many calls from Congressional offices?

HARRIS: I had a lot of calls from Congressional staffers and from Congressmen themselves, asking what was going on in Bosnia or asking for an explanation of our policy. Even now I think there is a core group of about 100 Representatives from both parties who would be willing to take Clinton on his policy. There are Republicans and Democrats prepared to support legislation which would expand our role in Bosnia. In the Senate, there are probably 25-30 Senators who would favor a more activist policy. That number may be growing. As our government is established by the Constitution, the Legislative Branch can't really take any initiative of foreign policy and that is what is missing. If Clinton were to exert some leadership on this issue, a majority in both Houses would support him.

Q: Are these Congressmen who have special expertise in foreign affairs?

HARRIS: I think the group represents a broad spectrum. But there was an absence of rigorous questioning of administration representatives by congressional committees. Since I have started working on the Hill, I have heard some criticism from Republican Congressmen and staffers. They feel that the Democratic-led committees were too reluctant to call State Department witnesses to discuss Bosnian policy. They feel that there was far too little of that.

Q: How much media interest was there during the period you served on the desk? Obviously, there is considerable interest now that you have resigned and done so publicly. How was it earlier?

HARRIS: There was a lot of media interest, but perhaps not quite enough. What Americans respond to is generally television pictures--blood in the streets. I don't think the networks, although showing those pictures, have not put them in their proper context.

You see and hear the shells being fired, you hear the sniper fire, you see people scurrying for cover and then you see the dead and the wounded, but that is all you get. There is no explanation of what and why these events are taking place. There is no discussion that Sarajevo has been encircled for seventeen months, that people can not leave their areas, that they are terrorized every night with artillery and sniper fire. Had the networks told the full story, we would be arguing now not only what we should do for humanitarian reasons, but what we could do about the root causes of the conflict, which is Serbian aggression.

The other thing that had prevented a full discussion of the issues is that Secretary Christopher and the other Clinton administration policy makers would have you believe that what we see on television is not what is actually happening. Sarajevo is under siege; there are other Muslim areas of Bosnia under siege, but the Secretary and other officials insist that we are witnessing just a civil war and that all three sides are attacking each other and that they would continue to do so regardless of any U.S. action because they have been doing it for hundreds of years. That rationale supports a no-action policy.

Q: Would it be fair to say that the issue is not historic ethnic animosities in the Balkans, but essentially Serb aggression.

HARRIS: It is as simple as that. The regime in power presently in Belgrade is driven by a twisted ideology that Serbs must live in Serbia and that Serbs can not live side by side with non-Serbs. That is what is driving the Bosnian conflict today. There are, of course, ancient rivalries and ancient ethnic differences among the three major groups, but they have lived relatively peacefully side-by-side for hundreds of years. The lie of the Milosevic ideology is exposed most easily by looking at the 25-30% of the Bosnian population which is of mixed ethnicity. What will happen to these people if the three Bosnian groups can live together? It is often the case that members of different ethnic groups have married. They have been reluctant to list themselves in census surveys or identify themselves in conversations as members of one ethnic group or another. They identify themselves as "Bosnians". Had we permitted the Bosnian state to come into being properly, primarily by allowing its army to operate with adequate weaponry, then there would have been a different dynamic and people would not have accepted so readily the view that varying ethnic groups could not get along together.

Q: Beyond the Serbian problem, what other issues are there in Bosnia today?

HARRIS: The war has torn everything asunder. The principal issue should have been "democratization". We have a vital interest in seeing that outcome for all the republics which came into being after the collapse of Yugoslavia. They need to become democracies quickly and start on the road to economic development. These are objectives that we are ignoring in Macedonia, for example. We should be moving full steam ahead there because by encouraging democracy and free markets, you discourage ethnic feuding and nationalism.

Q: What would you say to someone who is considering the Foreign Service as a career? You were in it for eight years. Is it a worthwhile career or is it only good for those who can hold their tongues?

HARRIS: I think it is probably useful if you can hold your tongue. There is no doubt that even after you have been in the Foreign Service for 20-25 years, you are unlikely to be in a policy making role even if you are appointed as an ambassador to a fairly major country or even in many cases as an assistant secretary. At the same time, I think it can be an incredibly rewarding career. You can get a lot of responsibility at a relatively young age. That is particularly true if you are serving at an embassy abroad where you are given great responsibilities and you assume positions of importance that you most often not reach in a comparable career in the law, for example, in the United States.

You do make enormous sacrifices. It becomes difficult to maintain any reasonable sort of contact with one's family and friends made before one joins the Service. One's life becomes more insular; your colleagues become increasingly your best friends. You become part of a subculture. That can be an advantage if you can consider these new friends as part of a new family, but it can also be a disadvantage because you can not live what most Americans would consider a "normal" life.

Q: You didn't fall or were pushed out of the Department. You left under your own volition. If you had not become involved in the Bosnian issue, do you think you would have stayed in the Foreign Service?

HARRIS: I am pretty sure I would have stayed. I had no thirty year plan, no five year plan. I moved from assignment to assignment. Who knows what I would have done after the next two years on the Bosnian desk? I have no idea what I would have done after that, but I was certainly looking forward to continuing my work on the desk. I probably would have had the same reaction had I been assigned to another desk.

Q: What was the approximate cause for your leaving? I know you have said that you did not agree with U.S. policy. Had someone counseled you to sit tight and work from within, slowly trying to move the policy in your direction. Could you have done that?

HARRIS: I am still of the opinion that I could have worked from within. I really felt that what I was doing was productive and sometimes even rewarding in the sense that I felt, particularly as we developed policy options or descriptions of policy options--listing the pros and cons--that had I not been drafting the paper, it would have in most likelihood been a weaker paper. But, by the same token, by the end of July, I realized that I had to leave because I was simply not going to sit in the office and participate in the implementation of a policy which would dismember a U.N. state. Had the Bosnian government caved in and accepted that dismemberment before I left, I would still have reached the same decision and would have resigned, although my departure might have been much more quiet because there would not have been as much of a point in speaking out publicly about what was going on.

Q: How clear was your policy guidance? did you have specific instructions or was it more amorphous which might change from day to day?

HARRIS: It was very amorphous. We had a one policy established since the beginning of May. President Clinton's preferred policy option for Bosnia was to lift the arms embargo or in the case of the joint action program, we would have supported the agreement and assisted in its implementation. But the lesser points of our policy were much more amorphous.

Q: What kind of guidance did the office director for Bosnia provide you?

HARRIS: We had two office directors, who approached the issue from two different perspectives. The first one, Michael Habib, was a non-interventionist--an absolute non-interventionist. At one point, he may have been virtually the only person on the Office of East European Affairs who was opposed to the U.S. intervening militarily in Bosnia. His relationship with the desk officer reflected that view. He was replaced by Terry Snell, who did believe that we had a responsibility of getting more involved in Bosnia. He was more responsive to the views of the people at the working level, who wanted the U.S. to do more.

Q: What role did our Ambassador and the Embassy play?

HARRIS: Not a great deal in terms of policy making. I didn't like a lot of the reporting that came out of Belgrade either from Ambassador Zimmermann or Charge Rackmales. I thought that they began with the same assumptions that our Washington policy makers made; i.e., that this was a tripartite conflict and that the U.S. should not have ground troops in Bosnia. I also thought that the Embassy had the typical case of "clientitis," for which the Foreign Service is notorious. It thought that we could work with the Serb regime and that Milosevic and Karadzic, the Serb spokesman, could be talked to with beneficial outcomes possible in that manner. I would have preferred for the Embassy to take a more independent course, but that is the way embassies operate in general. Belgrade was no means an exception to the rule. My understanding was that virtually the entire political-economic section favored intervention, but was consistently over-ruled by the Embassy's leadership.

Q: Before we end this interview, I would like to give you an opportunity to make any comments that might be helpful to future historians who might be interested in this period and the subject of Bosnia.

HARRIS: I have no doubt that what is taking place in Bosnia is genocide. The Serb attempt to drive all Muslims out of Bosnia or exterminate them, if that were necessary and if the world were not watching, meets the definition of genocide in international law. Secretary Christopher has failed to discharge his official responsibilities properly. He carried them out only partially and without the necessary objectivity by refusing to

determine that Serb activities in Serbian were genocide. Secondly, he refused to identify the root cause of the Bosnian war as naked Serb aggression, a nationalist-fascist regime in Belgrade. He has overlooked this fact because to recognize it publicly would have placed incredible pressure on the United States, as the world's leading power, to take action in Bosnia to prevent the genocide and the aggression. I believe that Christopher's failure in his respect are unconscionable and that was the principal reason why I left the Department.

The other reason is that this administration is abnegating the U.S. responsibilities accepted by this country under international treaties and in various international organizations since World War II. I refer especially to our obligations under the U.N. charter to prevent the destruction of a member state. The U.S., in fact, is encouraging the destruction of Bosnia by putting pressure on the legitimately elected government of Bosnia to accept its own dismemberment in violation of every U.N. Security Council resolution that has been passed on this subject. We have violated Security Council principles and the U.N. Charter. That too is unconscionable. History will be very unkind to this administration for abnegating these responsibilities and allowing the genocide in Bosnia to continue unfettered, although we had the means at our disposal to prevent it.

End of interview