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CHRISTOPHER HOH

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INTERVIEW

Q: All right. Today is April 14th, and this is part one with Chris Hoh. All right, Chris, can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

HOH: Sure. I grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania, and went to college at Georgetown in D.C. and came there because of the reputation in international affairs, which was something I became more interested in. Actually, at the time I was applying to colleges. Anyway, I came to D.C. and then joined the Foreign Service in 1984, a couple years after graduating, after having worked in and around the UN. And I guess by the time, I was coming back from an overseas tour in Germany, which is when I went to Washington to the European Bureau. That was 1994, I'd been in just 10 years, but all of that was outside of Washington.

Q: Was there a reason why you joined the Foreign Service? Was there a spark that, you know, encouraged you? How did you get interested in it?

HOH: So I was interested in international affairs and toward the end of college my friends were applying to law school. I thought, “I don't want to go to more school.” They were also taking the foreign service exam. I thought, “Well, that's free. I'm curious to see how I'll do.” And then, I passed and they didn't. I thought, “Well, maybe that means something.” And I thought, “I don't probably wanna do this for most of my career, but I really am interested when we say our policy is X or Y or Z, how is that implemented? What does that really mean in terms of the nuts and bolts overseas?” I thought, “I'll go check it out, try it out, and then probably stay in Washington and work on the hill or think tank or something like that.” Then, in typical foreign service fashion, every few years there was a new assignment and it sounded really interesting and I thought, “Oh, well

now's not the time to leave. I want to do that or that looks too attractive to pass up.” Before I knew it, 30 years had gone by.

Q: Wow. So what was your first assignment? Where did you go?

HOH: I went to Peru, where I was a vice consul and a political officer. That assignment came about because I only included on my initial bid list places that offered what they called a rotational assignment—where, in addition to the mandatory consular vice consul role, there was also a chance to work in the political or economic section. These positions were located all over the world, and Peru was the one I got.

I think the State Department, in its wisdom, looked at me—a guy who had studied German and had no background in Latin America or Spanish—and decided, “Let’s send him there.” That was actually part of their approach at the time. Even though they didn’t say it outright, your first tour was essentially an apprenticeship. You were being evaluated—you had to learn the ropes and show that you could function overseas before being tenured. So they often sent people to places where they didn’t already have an advantage.

That policy changed later, during my time in the service, especially for hard languages. If someone spoke Chinese, for example, they had an edge in the application process and were usually sent to a Chinese-speaking post for their first tour. That shift saved the department money on language training and helped attract the kind of people they were looking to recruit. I think it was a good compromise. You can generally tell early on whether someone is going to work out and deserves tenure—regardless of their language skills.

Q: Were there any surprises during that first assignment that made you feel like, “Wow, I really have to do this?” Or anything like, “Wow, this is something that I didn’t think of?”

HOH: I think one surprise was how much responsibility got thrown at me very quickly. The vice consul work wasn’t such a big deal, but still—those are important decisions for the applicants. I was doing only non-immigrant visa interviews.

Then we were moving the consular section from one part of the embassy downtown to a district farther out in Lima, along the coast. The consul general just said, “I’m putting you in charge of organizing the move.” I was like, okay. I didn’t have any particular background for that, but it went fine. Plus, the new consular section ended up being really close to where I lived, so I was happy about that.

Then, when I got to the political section, it was everything from “here’s how you do it” to “you’re on your own.” We were all prepped for my first meeting—my political counselor was going to go, and I was just supposed to tag along and take notes to see how it was done. But ten minutes before we were supposed to leave, he said, “You know what? I can’t go. Just do it on your own.” So that was like being thrown into the deep end.

With other things, like reporting, it was the same: “This is your area—write up what you think. Write up what’s going on. Write up what it means for the U.S.” Once I got the hang of the writing style, there wasn’t much editing. So I was happy about that. But at the same time, I realized—okay, these people are serious.

The interesting thing is, at the beginning, you do a lot. It’s all new and different. I was 25 at the time. I’d had a few other jobs, but this was a lot of responsibility. Maybe if someone came in at 35, it wouldn’t have felt like as much. But then, once you get to the middle of your career, things slow down. You don’t really get a lot more responsibility for a while.

Q: After that you came back to D.C., right?

HOH: Yeah, so I was in D.C. for one year as a staff assistant in the International Organization Bureau, which was interesting because I had done work in and around the UN. So I knew something about it. But this was during the Reagan administration, and the I.O. Bureau was one of the places where they tended to put more ideologically extreme people—far-left if they were Democrats, far-right if they were Republicans.

So I kept my head down about my prior background. Then one day, one of the ambassadors to the UN in New York—who had been a professor at Georgetown and whom I knew—was in Washington. He was in a meeting, and I walked in to give a note to my boss or something, and he started joking around. He said, “What, you let this UN lover in here? Do you know what he is? He’s virtually a communist.” That was José Sorzano, a brilliant Cuban American—really nice, but very conservative. It was kind of funny, but at the same time I thought, “Oh my God, they’re going to fire me tomorrow.” That didn’t happen.

In fact, the assistant secretary, Alan Keyes—who was also a bit of a firebrand—said, “I’m doing a big trip in Asia. I’ll be gone a while. I want you to come along and staff me.” So, on two days’ notice, I did a six-week trip that basically went around the world. It turned out to be a great introduction. I got along really well with everyone, even though they were often bashing the UN—which I didn’t think was great for the U.S. But my job wasn’t to make policy; it was to get the paperwork done. And I learned a tremendous amount. So that was good.

After a year there, I went up to our UN mission in New York for a couple of years. Part of that time, the ambassador was Vernon Walters—General Walters—who’d been deputy director of the CIA and George Bush’s deputy, and had a good relationship with Reagan. I ended up being a staff assistant for him, too. When I was getting ready to leave, I knew I was headed to Sinai for a year as a peacekeeping observer—which turned into a year and nine months. Walters said, “When you’re ready to leave Sinai, come see me.” I had studied German and wanted to get to the embassy in Germany, so that’s how I ended up there.

In Germany, I was in the part of the political section that followed German foreign policy.

I spent a lot of time at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other places around Bonn, which was still the capital at the time. I mostly covered what Germany was doing in the Third World or other regions. The big issue then was the breakup of Yugoslavia. My boss—the unit chief—covered it, but when he was out, I had to fill in. I started learning about the former Yugoslavia and thought, “This is really complicated.” All the factions—who’s who, and how does Joe keep this straight?

Of course, he was talking to German officials about Yugoslavia every day—sometimes several times a day—because the U.S. and Germany were coordinating very closely. When he was away, I had to jump in. I remember meeting with a German official named Michael Steiner—a really smart guy, who later did a lot of things. He was their Yugoslavia point person. Our special envoy was Charles Redman, and I got tasked with delivering a demarche to the foreign ministry. Afterward, Steiner said, “Chris, that was very good. But now let me tell you where your policy is going—I just got off the phone with Chuck Redman.” I thought, “Okay... but what do I put in the report? Can I say you agreed?”

So that was me dipping my toe into the Yugoslavia mess and starting to figure out the mind-numbing complications. I was all set to go to the German desk in Washington. They had offered me a position. But at the last minute, someone else with better connections got the job. So there I was—late in the assignment cycle—without a posting.

The folks on the German desk felt bad and were looking out for me. A couple of weeks later, they called and said, “You said you liked our no-BS approach. If you want another place like that, there’s an opening: Croatian desk officer. That office is so busy, they don’t have time for BS. People have even quit in protest over policy. If you’re not interested, we won’t say anything—but it could be a good opportunity.” I thought it sounded interesting. It was a hot topic.

This was right before Christmas. I was heading home for holiday leave and went to interview with the director, John Schmidt—who I’m still in touch with. He said okay. They were desperate for people, so I got the job.

In Germany, I had worked under three ambassadors. First was General Walters, then Bob Kimmitt for most of the time, and finally Richard Holbrooke—after the administration changed. When I got to the European Bureau in Washington in the summer of ’94, Holbrooke arrived about the same time as assistant secretary. Everyone assumed I was close to him. But the way Holbrooke operated, if you weren’t in his inner circle, you weren’t really on his radar. He probably knew my name, but we hadn’t worked closely at that point.

He reorganized the bureau, reshuffled offices, all the typical bureaucracy. Chris Hill came in as the new office director after Holbrooke pushed out others. I’d been there a few weeks when Chris got called to Holbrooke’s office on a Friday. He came back looking like he’d been hit by a truck—totally in shock. He said, “Guess what? Holbrooke’s making me director.” And we later learned why he was so stunned: Holbrooke said, “Fire

all the desk officers and get new ones.”

Chris, to his credit, said, “No, we can’t do that. They just got here.” The three of us—Bosnia, Serbia, Croatia—had all started within the past month. We weren’t tied to the old policy. Chris also knew the bureaucracy—if he fired us, it’d take months to get replacements. Holbrooke agreed to let us stay temporarily. If we didn’t work out, we’d be reassigned. But we all did fine, and we stayed.

Later that summer, Croatia wanted to kick out the UN peacekeeping force, UNPROFOR. There had been fighting between Serbs and Croats, and the UN was administering Serb-held areas in Croatia. Tudjman was fed up. I said, “Look, he’s frustrated but not ready for more military confrontation. I bet he’d let them stay if you just call it something else.”

So I made up a new name and a few cosmetic changes—a new chain of command, clearer that it was only in Croatia, and we put “Croatia” in the name of the mission, which was important to Tudjman. I wrote a paper, Chris Hill took it to Holbrooke. Holbrooke said, “I’ll do it.” Then he asked Chris, “Who wrote this?” Chris said, “Chris did.” Holbrooke replied, “Really? He could do that? I didn’t know that.”

Chris said, “I thought you knew him.” I said, “No.” And Chris was like, “Why didn’t you tell me?” I said, “I never claimed I was close to Holbrooke. People just assumed, and I didn’t correct them.”

Later, I actually did work with Holbrooke quite a bit. Sometimes I even drove him home when we were working late. He lived in Georgetown, I was in Arlington. He was staying at Pam Harriman’s place—she was ambassador then, maybe in Paris or New York. Not sure if she had more than one house. But anyway, that’s where he stayed when he was in D.C., and I gave him rides. We got along really well.

Q: He is constantly working, even in a car—thinking about it.

HOH: Oh yeah, no—I mean, his mind never stopped. He was always asking questions, always thinking. He was usually ten steps ahead of most other people. He could be outrageous. He was extremely egotistical and could be really hard on people.

All those traits made enemies for him or led senior officials to say, “We’re not going to pick him to be Secretary of State—we don’t feel we can trust him, we can’t control him, he’ll do more damage.” And that was all true.

But at the same time, despite the big ego and blunt temperament, I think he genuinely cared about doing the right thing—for America, for suffering people overseas—and was constantly asking: how can we make this happen?

If there was European indecision or Russian obstinance, his attitude was: we’re going to bulldoze through it. And that worked—in that case. I’m no expert on Afghanistan, so I

don't know if those same techniques served the U.S. or him particularly well there. But they worked great in the Balkans.

Actually, the desk officers had a nickname for him—Raging Bull, based on the movie. We called him RB. That way, we could talk about him more freely. Like, “RB said this,” or “RB did that.” Especially when we were being critical, it was like, “Can you believe RB did that? God damn it.” People wouldn't necessarily know we were criticizing the assistant secretary.

Q: Would he walk into your offices and all that—thinking and like demanding stuff? How were interactions like inside of the office?

HOH: Well, I mean, he was very good at Washington power. You had to go see him. But then he'd randomly gather, like, ten people in a room, sit there, take his shoes off, pick at his toes—and start talking.

He'd jump from life-and-death issues to, in the next sentence, trashing someone at the NSC, calling them all kinds of names. He could rant and rave—sometimes seriously, sometimes jokingly. I mean, he'd even throw things at people now and then.

But that wasn't so unusual. There were plenty of bosses who'd be considered abusive or outrageous by today's standards. That was just how it was. People yelled and screamed. Not everyone, of course—some were known for being kind and respectful. But if you had a screamer for a boss, you just accepted it—like, okay, I've got one of those.

Q: Yeah. So, you were working—okay, I got one of those. Yeah. So, you were pretty much writing, doing your desk duty as a desk officer. But when was the moment you started getting into closer work with Holbrooke? Was it during the shuttle diplomacy that you got involved with him more directly?

HOH: I want to say spring of '94. The shuttle came later. The peace initiative came later. That really didn't start getting cooked up until summer, during June. The French President's visit.

Q: Were you part of the Washington Agreement—the one between the Croats and the Bosniaks that created the Federation? That was in '94, right?

HOH: And it was signed here, I think, at a main state—I'm trying to remember. I think that happened before I got there in the summer, but it might've been in April—if I remember. By that point, though, they were all coming through a lot. The main negotiations were being handled by a team that was jointly UN and EU.

Q: With Sy Vance and David Owen?

HOH: Yeah, the Vance-Owen stuff. So, I did go out to Croatia for one of those rounds of negotiations, which were taking place in the Krajina [region in southern Croatia]. Actually, as the weather improved in the Balkans, the fighting intensified. Dick

Holbrooke was saying, "We've got to do something. We can't just leave this to the Europeans and the UN through our influence." He was really trying to get people motivated. Oddly enough, so was Madeleine Albright. Although they talked, I don't think either was quite aware of how much the other was doing. They were both trying to do the right thing and, frankly, trying to advance their own influence. They were rivals.

Dick would talk a lot to the vice president, who would try to calm him down and keep him away from the president, just saying, "There's only so much we're going to do." It wasn't really until the summer that I think the reality hit the White House: whether things go well or badly, we're going to end up with U.S. troops on the ground. We have commitments under NATO and other agreements to help the French and the British who are there with the UN troops. If they get into trouble, we're going to be there. And if some kind of agreement needs a more robust force to implement it, we're probably going to be there too.

As much as President Clinton didn't want U.S. boots on the ground, especially after Somalia, I think he realized this was coming one way or another. Let's try to make it so we deploy troops as part of a U.S.-led peace initiative, rather than sending troops in because of our commitments and our allies getting themselves into trouble. So, while it wasn't a very altruistic motivation from the White House, they did want to see the suffering stop. And then, things just really moved fast in June, July, and August of '95.

Q: Wasn't that the time when the French were saying they couldn't do it anymore and were planning to pull out if there was no solution? There was a whole conversation about how, if they pulled out, we'd have to get involved to help them. That was that period, early summer of '95, right?

HOH: That's right. I think it was the French president or someone else who came to Washington, and there was a conversation about that. Apparently, after the reception that Dick talked about, it was the first time the [United States] president really understood what it meant. It's mentioned in either his book, Derek's book [Derek Chollet, *The Road to the Dayton Accords*], or both, where they claim that was the turning point. Anyway, at a very high level, they decided to figure out a peace initiative. It turned out that Jamie Rubin, working for Madeleine Albright, had done a lot of the groundwork, collaborating with the NSC staff. This happened behind Holbrooke's back and the State Department's back. By then, Holbrooke had kind of checked out, saying he couldn't get the administration moving. He went on his honeymoon with Kati Martin and pretty much disengaged. Bob Frazier, the Deputy Assistant Secretary handling the Balkans, got a call [from the White House and he told us] he was canceling all his meetings. We were meeting with him at least once a day, but he didn't return to his office for about three days. We were all wondering what was going on. Eventually, he came back with the outlines of what became the Peace Initiative. He'd contributed a lot to it, but the real driving force behind it was Jamie Rubin, through Madeleine Albright, Sandy Vershbow on the NSC staff, and Tony Lake. This drove Dick Holbrooke crazy because, while he had a friendly rivalry with Madeleine Albright, his rivalry with Tony Lake was more intense. It took many people by surprise, including him.

Then they decided to have Tony and some others go sell it to our close allies. One principle was lifting the lift and strike provision. Another was a 51-49% territorial divide, among a few other key elements. The rest was to be determined as they went along. Once they got the British and French, and I believe the Germans on board—was it Bonn at that time? Or maybe Brussels—anyway, once they got the allies on board, the next step was dealing with the Balkan parties, and that's where Dick came in. His shuttle diplomacy took off from there. Of course, at that point, the NSC and the UN mission were no longer the primary policymakers. Holbrooke worked hard to keep the NSC out of many decisions.

Q: I know from Holbrooke's book—he talks about Iran and questions about Iranian influence in the region. Was that the big issue? And were Islamic extremists a concern?

HOH: So, anyone coming in from another country, whether it was the Serb military or Mujahideen sponsored by Iran, or many funded by Saudi Arabia, would all leave, and the only military left would be some kind of international peacekeeping operation under NATO command. That was set from the beginning and was an important strategic goal for the U.S. and our Western contact group partners. I'd say it was also a concern for Moscow, as they were worried about growing Islamic extremism, even within their own sphere of influence. So, we were all on board with that.

Getting the Bosnians on board was another story. They were happy to pay lip service, but they weren't sure how to implement it. I think they thought NATO would handle it, which it didn't. That became an issue, especially in the early 2000s when I was in Sarajevo as deputy chief of mission. We were still pushing the idea of getting these Islamic extremists out of there. By then, many had come as young men, married Bosnian women, and started families. It was a tough situation.

Q: Yeah, the vacuum created the space for all those influences to come in, right?

HOH: That's right.

Q: Yeah, let me ask—what about congressional pressure? I know there was pressure from the Hill to get involved or, you know, to unilaterally remove the arms embargo. How was that viewed in your office? Were you concerned that Congress might go their own way?

HOH: So, there was congressional pressure, and it came from both parties. It was more like particular members of Congress made it an issue. Bob Dole was one on the Senate side, but there was also Eliot Engel, the New York congressman, who was more focused on Kosovo but was another key figure. There were several others. In the end, though, congressional pressure didn't really drive U.S. policy. You had to keep key members briefed and be aware of their concerns, but they were really reacting to public pressure due to the CNN effect. That was relatively new at the time.

It's worth noting that 24-hour news was still a relatively new phenomenon, and reporters

with video from the scene were a game changer. Some of this had happened in Vietnam, but the extent to which people were seeing it in their living rooms every day was different. And, of course, CNN, with its 24-hour news cycle, would look for ways to fill up that time. So, they'd send more people, and being TV, they'd need video — showing people in misery, bombed-out buildings, rockets. This was new, especially compared to the first Gulf War. But this was the first real protracted conflict where this was happening.

There was a lot of pressure: How could we let this happen? These people are suffering, and we've got to do something. The idea that the Europeans were going to sort it out had been the previous administration's approach. The U.S. had done the Gulf War, and this was European territory, so the EU should figure it out. But it hadn't worked, and people knew that. So, there was congressional pressure in the sense of "do something," but I don't think it had much impact beyond that.

Q: I think that's a big part of the question. I know Christiane Amanpour was going from village to village, wherever things were happening, she was there. And of course, the media was a big factor in shaping the public's perception of the situation.

HOH: Right, right. So CNN was a source of information, and someone had it on all the time. I'm trying to remember, we didn't get internet on State Department computers until later. There was a conference room with one unclassified computer, and someone would have to go in, boot it up, and check things online. The internet was so new that, even though we were young desk officers, we didn't know how to use it. We'd have the interns do it, like, "Can you look something up online?" Makes me feel really old, but that's how it was. None of us had ever had to do anything like that. I mean, email was still a relatively new concept. The classified computers we used were completely separate from all of that.

Anyway, there would usually be a TV with CNN on silently in the director's office, and, like I said, the internet was there. But we got a lot of our information from the DART teams. USAID had the Disaster Assistance Response Teams, which, sadly, were eliminated under this administration. These teams worked in places where not only other U.S. government entities couldn't go, but also where journalists didn't have access. Their reports were a huge source of information about what was actually happening.

Another key source was the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, which monitored foreign radio and TV, translated it, and sent it back. This was a major open-source intelligence gathering operation. Those two sources provided a tremendous amount of information on the ground.

Later, as we got more involved and built up more contacts, people would call us. One of the most famous was Mohammed Sacirbey, who became the Bosnian foreign minister. He would call Holbrooke, but Dick wouldn't always take his calls, so they'd be passed down. But pretty much every day, he'd call in to share what was going on. He had a big network, so that was another source of information.

But I think just trying to figure out what was happening was a huge job. We tried to gather information from every possible source. CNN was one of those, but it wasn't the main driver.

Q: But you guys were probably receiving letters and stuff from people, right? Family members sending them, or people who knew someone at the embassy, trying to send information or ask for help. Was that happening too? People lobbying, I guess that's probably the best way to put it—different Balkan groups lobbying for action.

HOH: I mean, they were Balkan interest groups. Every ethnic group had its own expat American group, and the Croatian Americans I worked with closely at that time were no exception. There were actually several associations. They would come in to see me, but usually couldn't get appointments at higher levels, so they became a source of pressure. I don't think they were very good in terms of real-time information, though. So, yeah, there was pressure coming from a number of places, including public letters. But the public affairs folks just responded with whatever the current policy was.

I think the real pressure came from the sense that this was a disaster that had to be stopped. The instability was awful for world order and our interests. On a humanitarian level, it was appalling. We couldn't stand by and let it continue. So, I think a lot of that motivation really came from within the people working on it.

Q: So, given that you were focused on Croatia, were you also following what was happening during the summer, like Srebrenica? Was that part of your analysis? And then, most likely, Operation Storm heading into August? You know, we're now getting closer to the shuttle.

HOH: Yeah, so in the spring, maybe May, Croatia overran one of the Serb-held areas and basically told the UN to get out of the way because they were taking over. That was seen as a crisis, and we had to rename the peacekeeping force after that, as I recall. But by June, when we knew there was going to be a peace initiative, I may have mentioned this before, the three desk officers for Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia were moved over to the peace initiative team, and they backfilled our positions with other people to handle the day-to-day desk officer work. That definitely happened before the first shuttle, possibly even before the Tony Lake visit to London and everything else that was happening quickly over the summer. By the time [news of the massacre in] Srebrenica came in, I definitely knew I was on the peace team, doing a variety of things.

I actually took Mo Sacirebey's call on July 11. He had tried to reach Dick, but it got passed down to me. I was around, and they told me Mo Sacirebey was on the phone. Someone had to talk to him, so I did. He told me what was happening, and I remember saying, "I'll write this down." I'm sure there are emails in the archives that I sent out afterward. For calls like that, we'd often be on the phone, typing the information as we were hearing it. But I clearly remember him saying how appalling it was. I said, "I will pass this on. I agree. It sounds awful. I'll make sure this gets to everyone right away if it's true." We didn't know at that point.

I think a day or two later, the CIA had imagery showing disturbances in the earth that indicated mass graves. Until then, there was still some uncertainty about the reports—was it true? And if it was, how extensive was it? When you hear about thousands of people being massacred, your first reaction is, “Oh my God, that’s impossible. How could that be happening?” Even with the level of atrocities we’d already seen. So, Mo was saying, “Look, you have to start bombing the Serbs now.” I said, “I’ll pass that on. I understand where you’re coming from, but give us more details. But you can’t count on that happening anytime soon.”

Q: Right. And then I know there was a big concern that other [UN “safe areas”] might start falling, which is probably when you’re referring to the bombing and all that. There was a huge worry that other places might be next. I’m wondering now, heading into August with Operation Storm, when the Croats were going in—because I know Holbrooke talks about it as a way that actually changed the balance of power on the ground. He said it was the perfect window of opportunity, that it was time to act. How was that seen? Was it viewed as, “Okay, this is the perfect moment to do it?”

HOH: So, I would say that Holbrooke understood that, I understood it, and Bob Frazier understood it—that you weren’t going to get a peace agreement in Bosnia until the balance of power shifted. And that required the Croat troops coming in and regaining territory. The CIA sometimes published a new map every day. I think there were even a couple of days where they did multiple maps in one day. But certainly, you’d have several maps a week showing who controlled what territory in different colors. You could see the Croats moving up from the south in Western Bosnia, advancing toward Bihac, as well as bringing military pressure from the north.

But the UN policy was the arms embargo, and U.S. policy was to stop fighting. The message was: there’s no military solution, only a negotiated one. You all should put down your arms and talk. I remember talking to Bob Frazier—this was obviously before that tragic shuttle where they were killed—and saying that this military action was necessary if you were going to get a peace settlement. He didn’t disagree, but he just said, “Chris, you’re not Secretary of State.”

I think Warren Christopher fundamentally felt that the U.S. could not condone any military action, and we certainly couldn’t look the other way. So, that was tough. It wasn’t just about wanting peace and being opposed to military action—it was also about how risky military action was for our allies who had troops in the area. We saw that with the Dutch at Srebrenica, but also with the British and French. If we were seen as doing anything to encourage more fighting and potentially getting our allies’ troops killed, that would be catastrophic. I’m sure that was a factor in Warren Christopher’s mind, but it was a really frustrating time.

That said, the U.S. didn’t do much. The Croats, through the Federation with the Bosniak troops—there were many Bosniak troops, not just Croatian ones—had a huge impact. The Croatian arms funneling and armaments helped tremendously, but there were a lot of

Bosniak soldiers too. Together, they turned the tide on the battlefield. And I think that's when tens of thousands of new refugees started showing up in Belgrade, on top of the many who had already arrived.

Milosević saw this as a threat to his power because he couldn't maintain the narrative of Serb dominance and a Greater Serbia with all these miserable people flooding the streets of the capital. He didn't want another wave of refugees, so he was ready to settle. I think that was the key factor. Once we figured that out, we knew we could get a peace agreement. We knew Milosević would get on board—it wasn't going to come easily, but the fundamentals were in place.

And I guess we got the— Was the ceasefire from the New York principles?

Q: Yeah. I think that was New York. That was in September.

HOH: That was in September. At that point, as I saw it, that was the climax, and the rest was just the denouement. There was still a lot to do, but it was pretty clear that the fundamentals were in place for a peace agreement.

Q: Right. So were you part of that National Security Council meeting in early August? I think it was August 7th or 8th, before Tony Lake went out. I know there were papers going in and out of that meeting. Were you part of it? Were you writing them, or was that pretty much just the principals?

HOH: I wasn't at the meeting—it was for principals. A lot of the staffing at that point came from the NSC staff primarily. You said that was August? I guess it was. I had it in my mind as July, but that initial staffing came from the NSC. As I mentioned, a lot of the early drafts came up through USUN—Jamie Rubin's work, along with Tony Lake's staff, I think, were the key people, along with Madeleine Albright and Tony Lake. Then they pulled in Bob Frazier, who revised and shaped a lot of it.

The rest of us were still largely in the dark. It wasn't until they were ready to go that we saw any of that material. After that, Dick and John Kornblum decided to organize the peace initiative team. They said it wouldn't just be handled in the European Bureau—we're bringing in people from L, DRL, and elsewhere. Suddenly there were all these people writing papers and proposals. It seemed like overkill at first—more aspirational than realistic—but by the time we got to Dayton, we had these very extensive, well-developed proposals ready to put on the table. That surprised both the Europeans and the parties, even though they expected more from us. It was classic American style—we came with twelve annexes and all that.

It also created a situation where the State Department was clearly in the lead, which was very intentional on Dick's part. His thinking was, "The NSC staff can't keep up with this—and besides, we're not telling them." We were instructed again and again: don't tell the NSC. It's kind of funny, because there was an NSC staffer on the shuttle—first Nelson Drew, then Don Kerrick after Drew was killed—so they did report back, but not

too much. Dick was clear: he sent his own reports back and would label them for the Vice President and the Secretary of State only.

It wasn't the most collegial approach, but it gave him operational security—things didn't leak—and the flexibility to negotiate. One of the biggest problems in U.S. foreign policy, in my view, is that we negotiate with ourselves for so long that by the time we engage with the foreign parties, we're locked in and inflexible. Dick managed a process where he and his team could make decisions in the field, and then go back to their principals to explain and justify any new or unexpected compromises.

He kept the initiative with him, kept the State Department in the policy lead, and maintained tight control over the process. That was key to being effective in the negotiations.

Q: Was the NSC mad about it? Were they calling, trying to get information?

HOH: No, it was terrible. It really was. I thought Sandy Vershbow was just brilliant, and I had worked well with him before. But again, he couldn't get people to take his calls—though John Kornblum often would. John's the consummate diplomat; he'd soothe people, tell them almost nothing, but somehow make them feel better, you know?

We'd get some of those calls, and it was like, "Well, I'm not sure, Sandy. I'll have to check on that and get back to you." And he knew he was being kept in the dark. That was tough.

It was Sandy Vershbow, Sandy Berger as deputy, and Tony Lake—and Dick would just... I mean, if something reached them that he hadn't cleared, he'd get really mad. He'd want to know, "How did they find out about that?"

Right, yeah.

Q: So, do you remember the accident? The Mount Igman incident with Bob Frazier and the others—do you remember how that unfolded? Like, how did it go down that day? Because I know from Holbrooke's book that it was a major factor—it really solidified our commitment, like, "We want to get to peace."

HOH: Yeah, it really did. It was a Saturday, I think, and I was here when I got a phone call from the operations center saying, "Chris Hill's on the phone." He just said, "Something's happened. You have to come into the office." And I thought, oh crap.

Then we learned there'd been an accident—they were missing. And as the information started coming in, we knew it wasn't good. State set up a crisis task force—I was probably the one who put that together. We designated someone senior to be in charge.

Wes Clark called in at one point. He had managed to get down the hill to see what was going on and helped with the recovery of bodies. They didn't get back to Sarajevo until late that night, and that's when we started getting real information about what had

happened.

It was a tremendous shock, because we didn't think our own people were vulnerable. We were used to flying in and out of Sarajevo—which I hadn't done at that point; I'd been in Croatia but hadn't gone into Bosnia yet. But the people who did, they had to wear flak jackets and helmets on the UN planes going in and out. There had been potshots taken at those planes, so that was considered a risk. But coming over the mountains by road, while inconvenient, wasn't seen as a serious danger at all.

Q: Right. How well did you know Bob Frazier? Did you work with him very closely?

HOH: Yeah. That was hard—still was hard to think about.

Q: Yeah, were you at the funeral? Jack told me there was a moment when his daughter was speaking, and apparently that was the moment when it became clear—okay, we have to do this.

HOH: Yeah, you know, they were composed, but very sad. His wife, Katrina, was obviously in shock. I mean, I'm one of those people who cries more readily than most, so I was already crying a lot—but everyone was when his daughter spoke.

There was a meeting in one of the rooms by the new chapel at Fort Myer—there are pictures of that—and that's when they said, okay, this has to move forward now. We have to redouble our efforts. And I think that did create not only a stronger sense of purpose, but it also pushed aside some of the bureaucratic nonsense.

I wasn't in that room—it was principals only. Chris [Hill] was there. The rest of us—Phil Goldberg, John Burley, Jack, and I—waited outside for more than an hour, as I recall. Then Chris came out and said, "We're going on. I'm going to take Bob's place, Don Kerrick will take Nelson's, and Jim Pardew will step in for the Air Force officer..." I'm blanking on his name at the moment. Joe Kruzel.

Q: Yeah, Joe Kruzel.

HOH: And the funny thing was, we didn't think much of Jim Pardew at first. I told him this later—we became friends, and I actually think he was great. But he was like a sphinx during our daily secure video teleconference calls. The OSD people said almost nothing.

He had a bit of a Southern drawl, and it's terrible to say, but speaking slowly with that accent and saying very little, we just assumed he was out of the loop. Later, we came to realize he was sharp as a whip and really knew what was going on.

From the perspective of Dayton history, he had detailed notebooks—not just his diary, but also the reports he sent back to SecDef every day. That's by far the best record of the shuttle. It was the Pardew notebooks and reports that really allowed us, when we were working on the Dayton history project draft, to piece everything together.

Because otherwise, with Holbrooke keeping things so close-hold and just general bureaucratic gaps, it was often a mystery—how did this happen? What was going on? And there it was, all in Jim's notebook.

But anyway, that tragedy really did reinforce the U.S. commitment.

Q: Right. And then, when was the first time you went to Sarajevo? Was that later, or prior to that?

HOH: After. I didn't get to Bosnia until I went there as Deputy Chief of Mission, which was in 2000.

Q: And you were part of the New York meeting in September, right?

HOH: Yeah.

Q: Was that going according to plan, or—how did that go?

HOH: Well, first, there was the question of how to handle the Europeans and the contact group. These were all very senior people, right? But when your president, prime minister, or secretary of state is in town, you're just staff. So, here we were, with these folks treating it like their Super Bowl week of diplomacy. They had huge responsibilities and needed to be with their principals. But what the U.S. wanted to do was throw them into a room and have them sit there for hours without telling them anything while we were negotiating with the Balkan parties. We needed them there when the negotiations were finished, though, which created a lot of tension and disrupted their schedules. Still, they showed up for some things, though not for others, and it worked out in the end.

We were particularly focused on negotiating a ceasefire, but the Bosniaks were conflicted. They were winning on the battlefield, but they had suffered terribly. They didn't want more war, but they also wanted their territory back—especially in the East, places like Višegrad, Srebrenica, and Gorazde. So, they were very reluctant to agree to a ceasefire they would have to respect.

However, they eventually came around. I think Dick either spoke to [Bosnian President Alija] Izetbegović on the phone or someone had been there—maybe our ambassador. We had part of the shuttle team in the field and part in New York, with lots of moving parts. But eventually, we got the agreement, and we were ready to go. The Secretary of State was coming, and we were going to have a press event with all these important people.

Then, just as we were about to finalize, Mo Sacirbey came in and said, "No, we don't agree." That was frustrating, but Dick went ballistic. He said, "Your president agreed to this!" And then Sacirbey replied, "I'm the foreign minister, I'm not signing off on this, I'm not doing it." So, there was a lot of back-and-forth. I remember at that point we weren't at the mission, but over at the hotel. Dick was on the phone, trying to get

Izetbegović, refusing to talk to Sacirbey anymore. Chris was trying to calm down Mo Sacirbey. It was a tense moment where we felt everything might fall apart. It was especially frustrating because we knew the Serbs were on board. Milosević wanted a deal and didn't want the political problems that the continuation of the war would bring him. We had the goal within reach, and the Bosnians were on board at the president's level—though they were being difficult. In the end, Izetbegović came around, mostly through a lot of pressure and discussions. He wasn't a particularly decisive leader, and I think he realized he had a lot of constituencies to satisfy.

There was also concern, partly justified, on their part that the Dayton Accords ratified ethnic cleansing. That was the main criticism from [Bosnian Muslim leader] Haris Silajdžić and certainly from Mo. Others said the same, including the 51-49% territorial division and giving legal status to the Republic of Srpska. All of this solidified territorial and political gains that had been made by ethnic cleansing. To some extent, that criticism was true.

Q: What do you think about a contact group and that specific model? Was that a successful model going into the day negotiations or was it more okay?

HOH: No, it was a successful model for a number of reasons. First, you needed the big Western allies on board for both money and troops. It created a sense of equality, even though there was a significant power imbalance at the time. But when it was a group of five, with four on one side, and later the Italians and the EU institutionally involved, it made a big difference. The EU could bring along the rest of Europe, and with that, the UN and the international diplomacy dynamic were shaped by this being seen as a European conflict. The European regional institutions were leading, so the rest of the world followed, with some, like the Turks, Saudis, and Japanese, contributing actively, and others—though not in NATO—still offering troops and support, including other European countries.

I think it worked well overall, though it was difficult at times. We often dealt with their political directors, senior civil servants who really ran their foreign ministries, as ministers and junior ministers come and go. These political directors were used to frequent meetings and consultations, which is how the EU operates. They were good at meetings and coming up with consensus. The U.S. had done less of that, so it took us some time to figure out how to work with them. However, they didn't have much influence—they were more like editors. If there was a document, they could tweak the margins, but the fundamental decisions were made in Washington.

I remember several conversations with Dick Holbrooke, Warren Christopher, and others, where we basically said, "Look, the Europeans will be upset no matter what we do. If we don't act and fix this, they'll be mad. If we take the initiative, they'll be mad. So we might as well do what we think is right, and, of course, try not to antagonize them. We'll incorporate their views where possible, but in the end, if this is going to get fixed, it will be by Washington." The Europeans had their chance, but the way the EU functioned, at least back then, was less than the sum of its parts. That was the reality, and I think they

understood that.

You still hear today, in some of the negative commentary about Europeans, disparaging views that aren't justified. But the sense that Europe couldn't act decisively on the international stage—that was clear. It was just a hard reality, and it's still the case. It may change now, but it's certainly been true for a long time.

Q: What about the Russians?

HOH: So, the Russians were more on board. I mentioned earlier, when we were talking about the Mujahideen, they didn't like the spreading Islamic influence that this situation was creating. I think they also realized that the Serbs were kind of their brothers and that they wanted a deal, so they wanted a deal too. They very clearly saw that this was going to be a big deal, with troops on the ground, and they wanted to be involved—they wanted a seat at the table.

For these three strategic reasons, they went along. Even into the early 2000s, when I was in Sarajevo and the Peace Implementation Council met there or elsewhere, the high representative in Sarajevo would convene meetings with all the members, and the Russians were there. They were very much aligned with the goal of making this work, and they were willing to go along with things they thought made sense. They weren't going to be ideological or ethnic about it, because having a seat at the table was important to them.

But it was more than just that; they saw that this place needed to be pacified, and that this had to happen. Later, they changed their stance, and I think the real shift came from realizing that this helped expand NATO's presence closer to Russian territory. But at the time of Dayton, and even for several years after, they had made the calculation that strategically supporting this initiative was in their interest and, frankly, the best way to keep NATO at bay.

Q: All right, so what about Milosević? I see the shuttle diplomacy as a moment for him to change his international standing. It seems like he was trying to position himself as a peacemaker, in favor of peace, especially in comparison with, you know, Izetbegović or even Tudjman. Is that a fair assessment?

HOH: That's very fair. John Burley, my Serbia desk officer colleague, put it best: in the choice between a Greater Serbia and a Greater Milosević, he would always pick the Greater Milosević. Greater Serbia and Kosovo were how he rose to power, and he still used that, as do Serb nationalists. But he would fundamentally do whatever he could to bolster his own position. So suddenly having an American senior diplomat coming to his court was a big boost for him. He was an international pariah, and now all these people were coming. He really wanted that photo op with the American president, the British prime minister, and so on.

And like I said, he didn't want more refugees coming into Belgrade. He saw that as a

threat, but he could use those photos, combined with his dominance of the media, to gain support at home. There were times when there would be a meeting, and he'd surprise everyone by bringing in the press, even though it wasn't supposed to be allowed, again showing that he was very much in control.

I also think he had no time for the Bosnian Serbs. He thought they were country bumpkins who actually believed in the religious, ideological, and ethnic stuff. To him, those were just slogans to gain power and votes. But he didn't care, so he didn't follow through on it.

At the end of the day, I think our policy became: we will meet and talk with anybody unless they've been indicted as a war criminal. If they're an indicted war criminal, that crosses the line, and we can't engage with them. I think that's a good lesson in diplomacy. Often, you have to deal with people who have the power. They may be distasteful, awful people, and they may have committed heinous acts or caused them to happen. But I think the right thing to do is to talk to them. You have to be blunt about your position, leaving no room for misunderstanding. Let them know there are things they've done that you can't condone, but that doesn't mean you can't see if there's a basis for an agreement needed in a crisis, one that serves both sides' interests.

Now, sometimes you may say, "We're not going to meet with this person at a high level." In some countries, for example, you might say the ambassador or defense attaché won't meet with a particular person or organization, but you can do it at a lower level. Early in my career, I met with foreign representatives of the Algerian Liberation Group (whatever they were called) [ed. Islamic Salvation, FIS], because we weren't meeting with them at a senior level in Washington. We wouldn't invite them. They were based in Germany, I think in Cologne, and we wouldn't send an ambassador or senior officer, but we'd send someone else to meet with them and hear what they had to say, since no one would care who that person talked to. And you need to be able to do that.

So with Milosević, I think Dick Holbrooke had to talk to him. He loved the attention. He had a big ego and loved being at Dayton, strutting around and having the cameras on him when we let the press in.

Q: Yeah, but he loves his dinners. I heard about that in Belgrade. And in the meetings, all that.

Alright, Chris, I think we should stop here.

HOH: Okay.

End of interview