

# Policy shift before independence day

"LET'S face it: the Americans got it damn wrong," a European diplomat exclaimed in reference to James Baker's visit to Belgrade on 21 June. It was on that day the Secretary of State came down rashly on the side of maintaining a "united" Yugoslavia at any cost, declaring: "The break-up of Yugoslavia could have some very tragic consequences." Asked if the US would recognise an independent Slovenia, he said: "No, we will not."

One might ask what Mr Baker was doing in Belgrade allowing himself to be put on the spot at that stage. The background is typical of the on-the-hoof policy over this crisis: as the State Department was planning his trip to Albania, where he was to accept the adoration of the newly freed masses, officials said it would look odd if he did not stop off in Belgrade to show a bit of moral support. "After all, it's only half an hour away," one said.

There is much blood on the carpet of the State Department as a result of the ill-considered mission. Yesterday, on the eve of American Independence Day, a US official admitted on the subject of independence for the republics: "Provided it's done peacefully, it's something we would support". He added: "We never said we would not."

In truth, few policy-makers in the West knew what to think until the bloodshed started dictating for them the need for a policy shift. By the last week of May, diplomats of European governments had received sufficient indication of the republics' intentions to open bilateral consultations. "We asked each other, 'What are we going to do when it actually happens?'" said an envoy to a West European capital. "The only thing we agreed was that we didn't know what we would do, but when we did do something, it would be agreed among us first."

The next priority was not to stop the republics seceding, but to manage the process. "One way of delaying things was to allow for the debate among Western governments to take its course," said one European diplomat.

There are still varying views among the Twelve, with the Germans the most supportive of the republics. Bonn has come under heavy domestic pressure by groups who favour outright recognition. "The word self-determination has a certain flavour for many Germans, as you know," said one Bonn official. A

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## INSIDE FILE

by Annika Savill

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key EC ally on support for the republics is Italy, which shares the proximity factor. Italy's immigration minister predicted yesterday that 40,000 refugees might cross the border to flee the fighting; in Germany, the interior ministry reported that the number of Yugoslavs seeking political asylum in the first half of 1991 had soared to 15,000, 35 per cent over the same period in 1990. France still harbours anxieties about Austrian influence over a free Slovenia, and fears an expansion of Germanic dominance; it has not forgotten its similar anxieties when Chancellor Kohl pursued his unilateral pre-unification *rapprochement* with Moscow last year.

The mixed signals coming from Britain over the past week illustrate the hesitation in formulating a policy. At Luxembourg, John Major was said to have admitted the West could not go on supporting a federal Yugoslavia no matter what; Douglas Hurd emphasised the need to keep the federation together. There were also varying interpretations of Mr Hurd's more recent comment that nobody could prevent the Yugoslavs having a civil war. One intelligence analyst decoded it this way: "He was saying, 'let's lift our skirts before we risk getting dirty'; Britain had already achieved what it wanted to achieve, with the troika mission last weekend showing the EC could function inter-governmentally and was in no need of new institutions. If we get involved in a long-term way, it might indicate the opposite."

One problem about the CSCE as a forum for the Yugoslav issue is a conflict of interests, in that one of its roles is to safeguard respect for minorities; it must consider what happens to Croatia's Serbian enclaves should it let Croatia secede. The fact that Germany happens to hold the current chairmanship of the CSCE may be a driving factor; it was Mr Genscher who yesterday delivered the sharpest warning yet to Belgrade by telephoning President Mesic to demand an "immediate halt to all military actions". Yet it did not require the lobbying of Mr Genscher to force Western governments to start shifting; events, and television, did that for him.