

Cometh

the hour...

FINANCIAL TIMES 5/7/91

■ Who is responsible for the about-turn in American policy on Yugoslavia? The answer is evidently Lawrence Eagleburger, the 60-year-old US deputy secretary of state.

A former ambassador to Belgrade, he has accomplished the shift virtually single-handed. No longer is the Bush administration upholding the union at any cost, being now ready to offer Slovenia and Croatia the prospect of recognition provided that independence is reached by peaceful means.

Career diplomat Eagleburger is not one of the confidants surrounding the secretary of state himself, James Baker. While many of the inner circle such as chief spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler are able tacticians, their grasp of history is questionable.

Baker's recent speech on Yugoslavia, raising the spectre of the 1914 Balkan crisis in pointing to the risks of disorder spreading in central Europe, may have been well intended. It certainly made many state department career diplomats grimace at the flawed comparison with the run-up to World War One.

By contrast, Eagleburger has shown refreshing confidence and candour. He deplored the Serbian Marxists, and spoke out early in favour of the "market oriented, democratic" forces in Slovenia and Croatia. The central government was fast losing relevance, he said in that wheezy voice betraying his emphysema.

Alas for Baker, his speech has rebounded in accusations that his stated approval of preserving the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia may have encouraged the Serbian-dominated Yugoslavian military's drive to crush the breakaway republics. The charge is unfair as it over-estimates not only his own, but Washington's influence.

Even so, the secretary of state must be relieved to be backed up by such a safe pair of hands when, occasionally, he drops the diplomatic ball.