

Yugoslav crisis leaves US impotent

From Rupert Cornwell
in Washington

RESPONSIBILITY without power. Thus may be summed up the predicament of the foreign policy establishment in Washington as it contemplates civil war in Yugoslavia. The world's single remaining superpower is expected to influence every crisis around the globe. In this case, however, Washington has been impotent.

An inability to shape events should be no surprise. The Cold War is over, the prospect of the Soviet Union seeking to exploit the crisis for the advancement of Communism is non-existent. The turmoil threatens neither Nato, nor important vested US interests.

This week's hint that America, with its European allies, might cut aid and arms supplies to Belgrade has a hollow ring. Washington's direct annual aid is a pittance, just \$5m (£3.1m), and an arms embargo would have no bearing on the present hostilities.

Just four days before Slovenia and Croatia declared independence, the US Secretary of State, James Baker, was in Belgrade insisting Yugoslavia must remain a single state. Now the word "unity" is scarcely to be heard. Instead, officials make clear that any solution, including the breakaway of Slovenia and Croatia, is acceptable if it is achieved by negotiation and without bloodshed.

Critics of Mr Bush's turnaround have dismissed the argument that "rewarding" secessionists in Yugoslavia might encourage ethnic turmoil elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They claim the CIA was predicting the break-up of Yugoslavia last summer and, by emphasising the need for unity, the US administration may have signalled to the Yugoslav army that it would tacitly accept the use of force to preserve the *status quo*.