

@CHAPTER = YUGOSLAVIA

Yugoslavia has long enjoyed a reputation as the most free and open Communist nation, especially in permitting travel and work abroad, and in allowing a degree of freedom of expression and association. In addition, Yugoslavia's position outside the Soviet bloc and its strategic location as a non-aligned nation within Europe have increased its interest to U.S. administrations since the end of World War II. The U.S. traditionally has sought to preserve Yugoslavia's independence from the Soviet Union and to provide incentives for Yugoslavia to adopt a pro-Western foreign policy. As a consequence, successive U.S. administrations have paid scant attention to Yugoslav human rights practices.

The Bush administration has taken a welcome step in reversing this policy of inattention. Warren Zimmerman, the new ambassador to Yugoslavia and formerly U.S. ambassador to the Vienna session of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, has given unprecedented attention to questions of human rights. Changing conditions in the Soviet bloc have also contributed to this new interest, because Yugoslavia no longer has the strategic importance to NATO that it once had. Considerable credit must be given to Ambassador Zimmerman for his willingness openly to confront abuses that the Yugoslav government has long denied exist.

Pressure from the U.S. embassy comes none-too-soon, because evidence indicates that the human rights situation in Yugoslavia is far worse than generally admitted during the past decade. Moreover, the situation in certain regions of the country has worsened dramatically in the past eighteen months, most notably in Kosovo province. During the past several years, Yugoslavia as a whole has held between 1,000 and 2,000 political prisoners, most of them for "verbal crimes" related to nationalist expression.

Most abuses in Yugoslavia stem either from nationalist policies adopted by one or more of Yugoslavia's republics, or by abusive measures adopted by the federal or republic governments to quell nationalist sentiment by one or more nationalities. These violations range from the suppression of speech, including censorship of written materials, and the imposition of prison terms for attempts to express nationalist sentiment or to engage in ethnic association, to outright murder, as happened when government troops opened fire indiscriminately on a crowd in Pristina, Kosovo in early 1989, killing approximately thirty ethnic Albanians. Paradoxically, however, even while abuses mount in the southern province of Kosovo -- as the government of the Serbian republic, of which Kosovo province is part, tightens its grip on the ethnic-Albanian majority in that province -- conditions for free expression and democracy grow in the northern republic of Slovenia. In addition, at the close of 1989, the ruling Yugoslav parliament opened the possibility of a move toward a multi-party system for all of Yugoslavia, although it was not clear how serious the proposal was or what form it might take, since the move appears incompatible with the growth of a police state in Kosovo province.

Ambassador Zimmerman's response to these widely varying human rights conditions in Yugoslavia has been positive, pragmatic and, indeed, courageous. He and the U.S. embassy encouraged the movement toward multi-party democracy, at the republic and federal level, and made clear that in the U.S. view, the Communist Party should lose its mandated primacy, as has happened in Hungary and Poland. At the same time, he personally visited the troubled province of Kosovo -- despite a storm of protest from Serbian leaders in Belgrade, who even called for his ouster -- and made clear U.S. opposition to the abuses that have occurred as the Serbian republic moves to take full constitutional control of the province. Among those abuses in 1989 were the arbitrary arrest and

detention of hundreds of prominent ethnic Albanians, some of whom spent months in solitary confinement; the imprisonment of hundreds of ethnic Albanian peasants for verbal statements against Serbia's takeover of Kosovo province; and the firing of many of the ethnic Albanian intellectual and technical elite solely because of their ethnicity. After meeting in Kosovo with ethnic Albanians as well as Serbs and Montenegrins, Ambassador Zimmerman made plain that the United States, while not condoning ethnic discrimination by anyone, considers the Serbian government's current practices to violate the human rights of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo.

This forthright stance by the embassy has, unfortunately, not been completely echoed in the United States. There appears to be a view among U.S. policy-makers that, as occurred during Tito's long and repressive rule, a certain amount of repression by the Yugoslav government is necessary as a practical matter to hold Yugoslavia's fractious ethnic minorities together as a nation. Moreover, the U.S. Congress has sometimes been whipsawed between political pressures from different U.S. emigre constituencies, particularly those of Serbian, Croatian and Albanian background. Congress and the State Department thus have been less than clear-cut in signaling to the Yugoslav government that abuses against any ethnic group are unacceptable.

The Bush administration could take several steps to encourage the Yugoslav government to respect international human rights standards. One is for the State Department to back Ambassador Zimmerman's stance on human rights by linking Most Favored Nation trading status and other U.S. trade benefits to human rights improvements, especially in releasing political prisoners, eliminating laws that permit imprisonment for political and nationalist expression, and encouraging the formation of independent political parties. A second is for the State Department to back Ambassador Zimmerman by welcoming moves to introduce multi-party democracy into Yugoslavia's federal political structure -- moves that are incompatible with the emerging police state in Kosovo. While we take no position on whether Kosovo should be granted greater autonomy, we uphold the right peacefully to urge such autonomy, and oppose the Serbian republic's suppression of such calls. One possibility worthy of consideration is the opening of a U.S. consulate in Kosovo to increase U.S. visibility in the region. There is obviously a need to protect the rights of non-Albanian minorities in Kosovo, but the Bush administration should make plain that such protection may not be had at the price of the human rights of the ethnic Albanian majority.