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BOSNIA
THE BALKANS
EUROPE
AND ISLAM

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by

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The metaphor of the bridge is one of the most potent in the political lexicon. It acknowledges the fact of division and partition, whilst simultaneously proposing a means of connection and resolution.

Four months ago, at the reopening of one of the world's most famous bridges—the Old Bridge that links the two sides of the divided city of Mostar, in Bosnia and Herzegovina—I was struck once again by the potency of this metaphor, and of its relevance to the role of this small Balkan state in the wider world.

I was reminded of how, just occasionally in the life of countries, there are events so imbued with political symbolism—so overtly laden with historical significance—that they come, in time, to encapsulate an era: the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the 'twin towers' of the World Trade Center, the toppling of Saddam's statue. Each an iconic image, indelibly stamped on our memories, forever frozen in our mind's eye.

In the context of the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the deliberate destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar, which flashed around the world's television screens, was just such a moment. A moment when all the wanton barbarism that accompanied Yugoslavia's violent collapse was crystallized into a single second, and preserved in the memory for generations.

Why? Because no other event so graphically illustrated the triumph of mindless aggression over the values of civilization, which that tragic war came to represent. And no other moment provided such a stark demonstration of the moral and cultural bankruptcy of those on all sides, and of all ethnicities, who prosecuted that war at such terrible cost, and have profited from it, politically and personally, ever since.

But although this bridge—like the cultural and religious coexistence it represented—took far longer to build, and to rebuild, than it did to destroy, rebuild it we have.

And now we have a new image, and a new message. The Old Bridge's destruction may have represented the momentary triumph of evil. But its reconstruction represents a permanent triumph of will—the will to do whatever is necessary to ensure the ultimate victory of civilization over primitivism.

As I sat watching the festivities at the Bridge-opening ceremony in July, I could think of no more significant moment in the long process of Bosnia's reconstruction and rehabilitation that began, almost a decade ago, on an American Air Force base in Dayton, Ohio. No clearer act of closure on the past, no more powerful statement of confidence in the future.

Yet this event, and the victory it represented for civilized people everywhere, went by without substantial comment from a world that, for three years now, has sat by its television screens each evening, transfixed by the grim images from the shifting front lines in the war on terror. From Iraq to Afghanistan, from London to New York to Madrid, we have all been conscripted as the permanent audience in the 'theatre of terror'—never quite knowing when we might be propelled onto the stage as unwilling participants, caught up in the latest terrorist outrage.

For all decent people, of all races and religions, and for those for whom terrorism—and the war on terrorism—are not a part of the daily news, but a part of daily life, the victory we celebrated

in Mostar this summer—the slow but certain victory of civilization over primitivism—must seem a long, long way away. Yet the same was true in the former Yugoslavia ten years ago. Sarajevo, under siege and reduced to rubble, resembled nothing so much as a corner of hell on earth. In total, 200,000 people were killed and 2 million driven from their homes, as this most beautiful of countries was set ablaze by the fires of ethnic and religious hatred. Back then, the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina seemed as desperate and as insoluble as do many of the problems in the Middle East right now. Everyone predicted it could never be turned around. But everyone was wrong.

I remember the depressing determinism that used to guide Europe's response to Yugoslavia's violent collapse. 'The peoples of the Balkans are, and always have been, consumed by a virulent hatred of each other,' we were told. 'There was nothing that could be done,' they said. I heard a British Foreign Secretary, seeking to justify non-intervention in 1993, make just this case. He was wrong too—both about Europe's past, and Bosnia's future.

Actually, we in Western Europe have seen more wars—and incalculably more deaths from war—in the last five hundred years than have the countries of the Balkans. Yet war in Western Europe is now unimaginable.

Why do I make this comparison? Not to downplay the savagery of the Balkan wars of the twentieth century, or to absolve those so-called 'romantic nationalists' who pursued the illusions of national exclusivity and ethnic uniformity that fuelled those conflicts. I make this point simply to remind those who assume a certain superiority in these matters that we too in Western Europe were engaged in regular and brutal conflict until we found a means of resolving our disputes, and taming our worst instincts, just six short decades ago. And to remind us, too, that other people's conflicts—even the most intractable ones—can also be resolved, just as ours have been, if only we have the will, and the skill, to solve them.

What was so shocking about the wars in South East Europe in the 1990s was not that they were inevitable, but that they represented a return to that earlier model of atavistic nationalism that the rest of Europe had just discarded. For while the peoples of the Western Balkans fought to turn their ethnic diversity into national uniformity, the countries of Western Europe were abandoning their uniformity in favour of a new cultural pluralism.

While the nations of the former Yugoslavia fought new wars over borders, real and hoped for—the countries of the European Union were actively dismantling the borders over which they had fought for so long. As the Balkans were plunged into internecine warfare in the 1990s, the European Union was establishing its reputation for being what the Irish politician and Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume has rightly described as 'the most successful conflict resolution mechanism in history'.

Take France and Germany: war between them is now unthinkable. Why? Because the values they share—an unshakeable attachment to democracy, to an open and plural society, to the rule of law, and to freedom in economic life—are far stronger than anything that divides them.

The key revelation of modern Europe is to see diversity not as a problem, but as an advantage; to recognize that differences are there, not just to be tolerated, but to be celebrated; to understand

borders as anachronisms from the past, not sources of protection for the future. This is the gift, the priceless gift, that Europe can give Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider Balkan region.

But it is not the only gift. The founding fathers of the European Union could not have known it, but they were also creating what would become the most powerful instrument for regime change the modern world has ever known. Eight of the ten countries that joined the European Union last May are testimony to this fact. Their transitions from dictatorship to democracy, and from state to market economies, were driven forward by the magnetic pull of the Brussels institutions, and by the EU's farsighted ambition to build a Europe, whole and free.

If that process can be replicated in South East Europe—if the countries of the Balkans can follow in the footsteps of the ten new Member States—then the democratization and economic liberalization of the continent will be complete, and this European continent of ours will be genuinely whole and genuinely free. But relationships, as they say, involve give and take on both sides.

It is common practice to focus on what Europe can bring to Bosnia and Herzegovina, but rarely do we ask what Bosnia and Herzegovina can bring to Europe. And here I return to the Mostar Bridge. For just as Mostar represents the keystone for Bosnia and Herzegovina, so Bosnia and Herzegovina, I genuinely believe, could provide a kind of bridge for Europe. And if ever that bridge was needed, it is now, in this post-9/11 world.

For there exists today a vocal school of thought that insists on dividing humanity—a school of thought which argues passionately that, since the end of the Cold War, the great clashes are driven not by political, but by religious and cultural creeds. That thesis was most famously argued by Samuel Huntington in his book The Clash of Civilizations.

In the wake of the apparent triumph of liberalism—the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the spread of democracy and the opening of markets through globalization—Huntington warned against an assumption that conflict was at an end. 'The most important conflicts in the future', he wrote, 'will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations from each other'. 'Conflict', he noted, 'along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1300 years', and 'on both sides the interaction between Islam and the West is seen as a clash of civilizations.'

Look at any country that straddles this fault line and you find the same thing—conflict. Conflict in Lebanon, in Osetia, in Georgia, in Sudan, in Macedonia. To those who subscribe to this thesis, the facts speak for themselves. For them, the Balkans in general, Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, and divided cities like Mostar most of all, represent just such another cultural fault line—a Great Divide across which the Clash of Civilizations is destined to resound through the ages. For them, the destruction of the Old Bridge represented a gloomy vindication of their case.

But the reconstruction of the Bridge—and the determination of people throughout and beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina to see it rebuilt, stone by lovingly placed stone—punch great holes in the Huntington thesis. And so does the renewal of Bosnia and Herzegovina itself.

Because, after the horrors of that terrifying war, this country has been making almost miraculous strides towards a stable peace. A million refugees have returned to their homes—almost half of

them living alongside the very communities that drove them out. There is complete freedom of movement. We hold regular safe, free and fair elections. We have a stable currency and a growing economy. Mostar now has a single, unified city government, and Sarajevo is returning to its familiar role as cultural entrepôt.

No one can doubt there is a long way to go. There are setbacks from time to time—acts of provocation and intimidation that damage communal relations and raise tensions.

But the trend is clear. While the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina continue, in the words of Ivo Andrić, 'to rejoice and mourn, feast and fast by four different and antagonistic calendars and send all their prayers and wishes to one heaven in four different ecclesiastical languages', they are also slowly, hesitantly, often painfully re-establishing that paradoxical tradition of unity through diversity that Andrić so skilfully evokes, and that the modern Europe now represents.

It is a unity that comes from centuries of shared experience—of triumph and of tragedy—and from the certain knowledge that your future is destined to be as intertwined, as has been your past. It is the unity upon which the peace of Bosnia and Herzegovina has been based, and on which, more recently, the European Union was founded. And that unity is now further strengthened by the unshakable belief, held equally, and perhaps surprisingly, by all of BiH's peoples, that this country's future must be a European future.

And here, Huntingdon's thesis again comes unstuck, as the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina forge new alliances that bridge his carefully drawn fault line, and which undermine the cohesiveness and homogeneity of his crudely defined civilizations. Far from turning its back on Europe after the horrors of the war, as some predicted they would, BiH's Muslims —like their Orthodox and Catholic compatriots—are enthusiastically embracing Europe, and single-mindedly pursuing membership of Europe's pre-eminent institution—the European Union.

If I have a worry, it is not the Balkans desire to get to Europe. It is Europe's willingness to keep the door open long enough to let them do it. I fear the change of mood—especially the mood of the public—in Europe, where domestic tensions are already beginning to be felt in foreign policy.

Consider for a moment the chain of events that unfolded following the recent murder of Dutch filmmaker, Leo van Gogh, at the hands of a man described as a Muslim extremist. Mr van Gogh, a distant relative of Vincent van Gogh, had incurred the wrath of the conservative wing of the Islamic community for his criticisms of fundamentalist Muslims. On the Monday after his death, a Muslim elementary school was bombed in Eindhoven; on the Tuesday, another Muslim elementary school was attacked by arsonists in the town of Uden; and by the end of the week, police had reported a further four attacks on Islamic sites across the Netherlands. In what seemed to be retaliation, arsonists then tried to burn down Protestant churches in Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Amersfoort.

And the result? Talk of tougher policies on border control, immigration, and asylum and the further isolation and radicalization of the Muslim youth in the country. And a likely hardening of public attitudes—in the Netherlands as in so many Member States towards a further widening of the Union.

I fear that Europe's doors are closing—that protecting what we already have will soon be seen as more important than proselytizing for what could be. That, without strong political leadership, open Europe could all too easily morph into fortress Europe. That would be a short-sighted and seriously retrograde step.

I hope, at the very least, that Europe will recognize that even within its present borders it cannot be complete with a black hole in the Balkans, an unwanted enclave trapped in its south-eastern corner. That would be to abandon what has succeeded so spectacularly across Central and Eastern Europe—namely, the prospect of joining the Union, with all it brings in terms of living standards and freedom of travel—if, but only if, you carry out the reforms required.

And I hope my friends in the Balkans will realize that they must hurry—time is not on their side. They would be ill advised to wait too long as beggars at the door of Europe, asking to be let in out of charity—and better advised to work together as a region and present their case to Europe, not just on the basis of what the EU can do for them, but more on the grounds of how much they can add value to modern Europe.

It is self-evident why this is important to the Balkans—and, I would argue, to Europe, too. But why is it important to the wider world as well?

Because Bosnia and Herzegovina challenges directly the assumption that a country can be European or Islamic, but it can't be both. The best and first person to express that view was Alija Izetbegović who spoke here three and a half years ago—and he was right.

It challenges also the tendency, both in the West and in the Islamic world, to portray each other's extremes as norms, and to judge each other accordingly. Just as some Muslims have too readily viewed the West as an immoral haven for criminals, drug addicts and prostitutes, so too many in the West view the Islamic world as a haven for extremists and fundamentalists.

The truth of course bears little relation to these easy caricatures. How do we know this? Because the two live side by side in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing the Islamic world with real experience of modern Europe, and providing Europe with a much-needed insight into the gentle, tolerant, civilized, and civilizing values which are the true reality of Islam.

You see, it is a remarkable tribute to the Muslim community of BiH—as for the other religious communities for that matter—that, in the main, and despite the horrors they have been through in the all too recent past, they have resolutely declined to be radicalized—as a stroll along Sarajevo's boisterous and fashionable Ferhadija on a Saturday night makes clear. Or as the thin spirals of blue smoke rising into the still autumn air at this time of year, from the slivovica stills in every Bosnian village, will attest.

Just over a year ago, former President Clinton came to open the cemetery at Srebrenica, where the victims of that European calamity are being steadily laid to rest. The ceremony took place in front of an audience of 20,000 Bosniaks, in a Serb majority area, guarded by Bosnian Serb police, in an atmosphere of calm dignity, without incident, without a cross word, without rancour.

Compare and contrast with Northern Ireland funerals for those murdered by the other side. Or with what has been happening in Kosovo in recent times—or nearby Holland for that matter.

BiH's Muslims are showing in the practice of their everyday lives that Islam can be no less a European religion than Judaism or Christianity—and in so doing offering a glimpse of the kind of bridge that can exist between these allegedly competing civilizations.

But it is not just to the Islamic East that BiH offers Europe a bridge. In a curious way, it also connects Europe and North America. Let me explain.

The fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has managed to make such fast progress after the war is above all a tribute to the people of BiH—all the people of BiH. But it is also a result of the support Bosnia and Herzegovina has received from a broad international coalition, which includes, among others, both the European Union and the United States. Here again, BiH has something instructive to offer those beyond her borders.

The history of the war here is not just BiH's history: it is a dark chapter in Europe's book too. And in the history of transatlantic relations in general. We all know how Europe dithered, and the fires of war took hold in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And history will deal with us harshly for that failure. And for the fact that as Europe and America squabbled about what to do about it, the blaze raged out of control, until the United States said 'enough' and stepped in decisively to extinguish the conflict on the European territory and amongst the European people.

Fortunately, we have learned from our mistakes. The efforts to build peace in this country are—at last—succeeding because this is a united effort, in which Europe and America are working as partners, as a team. Our policy is a common policy. We speak with a single voice. And Europe has learned too. Famously divided during the Yugoslav wars, Europe has now taken steps to get its act together.

Crucially, the EU has provided the political destination for this country and its neighbours to aim for—the prospect of membership of the European Union once they meet the required standards. And it is pouring huge resources, over a million euros per year, into helping them to do so.

So here too Bosnia offers an example to her friends in the West. As we work to rebuild the Atlantic relationship, to repair—post-Iraq—fractured relations in NATO, we have here in Europe an example of that relationship which is already working well—a partnership between the US and the Europeans which remains an indispensable feature for rebuilding this substantially Muslim country and which demonstrates what can be achieved when Europe and the US work together on a more equal basis than in the past.

Twelve years ago, the Prince of Wales, speaking at the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, observed, 'These two worlds—the Islamic and the Western—are at something of a crossroads in their relations. We must not let them stand apart . . .' What a grimly prophetic English understatement that has proved to be.

But now, in this post-9/11 world, it is surely more necessary than ever to narrow the gulf that has opened between these two worlds, to stand firm for tolerance and coexistence, and to defeat those forces of fanaticism intent on sowing division and hatred, and returning this planet to a new dark age.

So can Bosnia contribute to that crucial struggle, by showing that it is possible to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable? By reconnecting the apparently permanently disconnected? By proving that what we are told are two permanently warring world views, can nevertheless live side by side in this one ancient interdependent country, in our currently profoundly interconnected world? Well, only time can answer that.

What is certain is that we are building bridges within Bosnia and Herzegovina. What is possible is that we can help build bridges beyond Bosnia too. If only by proving that what enmity destroys, hope can still rebuild.