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SPEECH TO SUC CONVENTION IN TORONTO: October 7, 2000

Thank you for this opportunity to share a few thoughts with you. Last Thursday I was a participant at a taped debate with a State Department official at Voice of America. At the time we did not know how events in Belgrade would unfold. So the presenter taped two introductions. The first went “Today Slobodan Milosevic unleashed his tanks and snuffed out the democratic revolution...” The second was “Today Slobodan Milosevic bowed to the demands for his resignation and left office.” Thank goodness that today it is not the rumble of tanks we are hearing but instead some of the most encouraging words of this young century “U Srbiji je svanuo novi dan.”

These are the words of President-elect Vojislav Kostunica and I think they are truly prophetic. The situation in Serbia remains extraordinarily volatile but the direction is clear. The September 24 elections have heralded the end of Serbia's long national nightmare. Over the past 10 days we in Washington have given active support to these developments through press releases on an almost daily basis.

When historians look back on the west's treatment of Serbia in the 1990s they will see a story of bullying, incompetence, double standards, hypocrisy and immorality that has few if any parallels in history. The west's leaders may never stand before The Hague, but they cannot hide from history. History will act as prosecutor, jury and judge. And its judgment will be harsh.

This dark period is coming to an end. Whatever the twists and turns of the days ahead, there is no doubt that the September 24 election will fill a glorious chapter in the annals of democracy. The Milosevic era is finished. That means Serbia will never be the same again. That means our job in Washington will not be the same. We must move past history to the future. Instead of primarily fighting against adversity, we will now be able to directly influence policy.

But...this does not mean that the war is over. As Winston Churchill remarked after the Battle of Britain, “This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is, however, the end of the beginning.”

This image perfectly describes where we stand today in terms of Washington's policy toward Serbia and where we are heading under either a Gore or a Bush administration. I will outline what the Washington office has been doing over the past year, what our objectives have been and try to make an honest assessment of how we have met them. Most importantly I want to conclude with some points about how we should shape our strategy for the new circumstances and the new challenges ahead.

To start with policy today: the most remarkable aspect of Washington's policy today is that there is no policy. The US approach to the September election was to pretend that there was no election. As events in Belgrade have unfolded, Washington has been marginalized. It became involved in irrelevant distractions like Montenegro's security. This

continued the pattern since the end of the NATO war of pretending that the Balkans did not exist. In June 1999 the top policy makers (Clinton, Gore, Albright, Cohen, Berger and Holbrooke) declared victory and went home. Although they had trumpeted the Kosovo war as the defining moment of post-Cold War American foreign policy, their follow-through was non-existent. Post-war Kosovo was turned over to the UN. US forces hunkered down behind the razor-wire of Camp Bondsteel. Within the State Department policy was handed over to a group of junior officials who, however competent they were, did not have top-level clout.

The motive was clear. Top policy makers knew they had come within inches of disaster. They knew that they had created a mess and wanted to have as little to do with it as possible. They wanted to stop the clock with the end of the war. Their public attitude was that NATO's war in Kosovo was a success and they didn't want anything, least of all the truth, to come between them and this comfortable illusion. This was why I never believed that the Administration wanted to spring an "October surprise" over Montenegro. They want to deflect attention away from the Balkans not toward it. All they want is good news, so be prepared for Gore to take credit for getting rid of Milosevic – despite the fact that Administration policy has done so much to protect his grip on power.

In this hear-no-evil, see-no-evil atmosphere that prevailed over the past year, the administration didn't want to hear the reports of reverse ethnic cleansing, of the desecration of Christian holy sites, of murder and intimidation, of environmental degradation, and of prostitution and smuggling rackets. Even impeccable witnesses such as Bishop Artemije were given no more than a polite hearing.

In Washington we did everything we could not to allow them to get away with this deceit. We bore active witness to the truth. You will have seen our many letters and press releases to the Administration and Congress. These may go unanswered but they are not unheard. As SUC directors visiting Washington know, when they meet officials they are told: "We know you. You are the people who are always sending us those tough letters."

This is good. But our main problem – how to change policy -- lay elsewhere. Officials would always say that the problem was not with American policy but with Slobodan Milosevic. "You know what to do" they said, "get rid of him. So long as he stays we can do nothing."

Doing nothing of course meant continuation of sanctions, denial of reconstruction aid and blatant disregard of the provisions of SCR 1244 which ended the Kosovo war. We protested that this approach did nothing to change the regime. In fact it did the opposite. By impoverishing the middle class and slapping legitimate Serbian aspirations in the face, this policy kept the regime in power. We argued strongly that US policy seemed to have struck a devil's bargain with the Belgrade regime to oppress the Serbian people. We pressed this argument not only with American officials but also with EU and Russian officials.

At this stage SUC members will ask a very legitimate question. We read and we like your letters, they say, but what effect do they have?

This is the right question but the answer is not straightforward. In public policy, instant success is rare. For 26 years the Greeks have been trying to get the Administration to kick Turkey out of Cyprus. It hasn't happened yet.

You cannot say therefore that because we have argued against sanctions and sanctions are still there, we have failed. This is a simplistic approach and obscures what I see as the SUC's main achievement over the past year, namely that we have helped create a climate of doubt.

By this I mean that we have made a dent in the facade of that cocksure arrogance that is the Secretary of State's office at the State Department. They want to claim that right was 100% on their side. We have not let them get away with this miserable lie.

How have we done that? By pursuing the issue of war crimes by NATO commanders (and getting support from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) we caused the Pentagon to scurry around the Hague tribunal to cover their tracks. We put them on the defensive. Whenever General Wesley Clark appears in public in the Washington area, he is confronted with SUC DC chapter president Alex Brkic giving him a hard time. By raising the concept of ecocide, environmental damage as a deliberate instrument of war, we shamed the UN and others into setting up an investigation. By publicizing the stories of crime and destruction in Kosovo, we undermined the claims of victory. By keeping alive the images of expulsions from Krajina, Eastern and Western Slavonia and Bosnia, we highlighted the fact that the Serbs too were victims of the region's turmoil.

Overall our approach was designed to demonstrate that the Serbs had not had a fair deal, that they had been unfairly demonized and that redress was overdue. A key aspect of our approach was that, when we criticized policy, we always offered an alternative and we drew on the SUC's established reputation as a champion of reform and democracy. We were proud to be associated with brave fighters for democracy such as Dusan Batakovic.

These efforts were hardly a solo performance by the Washington office. SUC directors were frequent visitors to Washington, occasionally giving presentations on Capitol Hill; sometimes, whole chapters visited to lobby Congress; all of your letters and phone calls to the Administration and Congress amounted to a barrage of material. We have received welcome intellectual support from institutions like CATO and stalwart supporters like Jim Jatras. In addition, our efforts this year were much strengthened by the opening of the External Affairs Office of the Serbian Orthodox Church under the leadership of Father Irinej Dobrievich. This has performed splendidly. We are in regular touch and we try to coordinate messages. There may be plenty of Serb-haters in Washington but there are no Father Irinej-haters. Thank you and congratulations, Father.

The positive aspects of our campaign are beginning to show themselves. How?

Remember. We are at the end of the beginning. The beginning was a period when the Serbs could do no right, when Milosevic was the source of all evil.

This period has closed. It was a very negative period but we can begin to put this behind us in the firm expectation of better times. This is where the climate of doubt I described earlier is paying off. The European Union, President Chirac, have announced they are lifting sanctions. The Americans are close behind. Gore repeated Clinton's earlier pledge in Tuesday's presidential debate. We are in touch with the Russians urging them to take a more creative approach. President Clinton has said that the time has come for Serbia to take its place in the European family of nations. In the Rose Garden yesterday he had some fine words of praise for Serb Americans.

How has this change come about? By far the greatest part of the credit is of course due to the people, students and workers of Serbia. But I would also reserve a small part for SUC's own efforts. By raising so many questions so often about past policy, we have created a realization in Washington that Serbia has been hard done by, that it is absurd to try to create a stable Balkans while treating Serbia as a black hole, that Serbia also has legitimate aspirations. This is the true answer about the results of our efforts. We have created a climate in which even the Washington Post, a resolutely anti-Serb newspaper, saw the need to state last Sunday that "the time has come for the United States to reestablish credibility with the Serbian people." This is exactly our message.

The time has come to look ahead. How will Balkan policy change under either a Bush or Gore administration?

First, two points that Bush and Gore have in common. Neither is especially interested in foreign policy. So, absent a crisis, neither will give a high priority to overseas issues. This means that the scope for dramatic gestures is limited. Second, neither Bush nor Gore will have the emotional investment in the Balkans that Albright has. This is true even if Holbrooke becomes Secretary of State under a Gore administration. Both will be looking for ways to reduce US military and financial exposure in the Balkans. Both will be looking to the Europeans, including the Russians, for more help and leadership.

Similarities apart, there are also plenty of foreseeable differences. To start with Gore. He is clearly more identified with the Clinton policy than Bush. He is known to have advocated bombing. During last Tuesday's debate he spoke about 'genocide' in Kosovo. He has christened his foreign policy approach as one of "forward engagement." His foreign policy adviser Leon Fuerth is a man who puts single issues like human rights ahead of the broad national interest. Richard Holbrooke may become his secretary of state. Gore is more open to some of the Washington-based anti-Serb interest groups with close Albanian links that have played such a destructive role in the Balkans.

This sounds like an unpromising mix. The one silver lining I see is that the reality on the ground has moved on. There is a good group of well-informed officials in the State Department with whom we can work well. Our goal will be to persuade a Gore administration, if this is what emerges, of the need for change, including over Kosovo.

Bush would, I think, be more open to our ideas. He and Cheney are on record as wanting to withdraw US troop presence in the region. In the Tuesday debate he correctly stressed the central Russian role. Neither has any stake in Clinton's so-called victory. They will not be under the thumb of Washington interest groups. Our objective will be to persuade them that actively assisting Serbia to return to the European mainstream will accomplish the goal of a more productive policy toward the region.

The administration is not our only target. We have conducted an active relationship with Congress. Here we have some good allies. But we also have many well-funded and powerful opponents, who, even with Milosevic out of the way, are out to make life difficult for the Serbs. Between these groups, there is a collection of middle of the road representatives who, sadly, often act in a very muddle-headed way. An example last week was that we were faced with a last-minute fight against a misguided bill called the Serbia Democratization Act of 2000 which might have better be called the Slobodan Milosevic for Permanent President Support Act. As I speak, it looks as though this fight has been won and the bill is on hold. Our lobbying against this is once again available on our web site. Which reminds me to pay a well-earned tribute to Nenad Vukicevic for maintaining the site in such good, accessible and up-to-date shape.

A few words in conclusion. The past two years have been difficult. We have faced deep-seated and well-funded hostility; we have faced the combined weight of the federal government; so long as Milosevic was calling the shots, we were fighting with one or one and a half hands tied behind our backs. We are a very small office. Occasionally we had to face some very unfortunate divisions of opinion from within the community. That we achieved any results, such as the tied vote in the House on the NATO bombing, was a miracle. But our greatest achievement was to demonstrate that the Serbs had a voice and a presence and that we were watching.

This will equip us well for the future battles, for battles there surely will be. Sanctions, Kosovo, reconstruction, The Hague, reintegration into Europe. There will be people trying to raise the bar on Serbia. Already a sinister campaign has started to paint Kostunica as first nationalist and second democrat. We have to strangle this libel in its cradle.

Which brings me to my final point which is the underlying rationale for a presence in Washington. I think it was Woody Allen who said that 95% of show business was about "just showing up." Put it another way. If you don't put a team on the field, you lose by default. Serbia's adversaries and competitors are all very active in Washington. Croatia is the new blue-eyed child. To date the absence of a functioning Serbian embassy has been a major handicap. Hopefully this will change soon. In the meantime it is up to the community to ensure that the Serb voice is also heard. With your help, this is what I have been very proud to do over these past years. I thank you for this privilege and this opportunity. There is no doubt that happier times are ahead. We can move beyond bitterness to a much more positive atmosphere where our voice will be actively sought out and listened to. I look forward to working hard to make this happen. Please remember, if any of you are ever in Washington, please get in touch. Thank you.