

IDENTITY, RECONCILIATION, AND THE STRUGGLE OVER KOSOVO

Address at the J. Dennis Hastert Center
for Economics, Government and Public Policy
at Wheaton College

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a distinct honor and privilege to be a guest of the Hastert Center, named after the longest-serving Republican House Speaker in history.

I would especially like to thank President Ryken and Professor Norton for the invitation to address you here tonight, at the premier liberal arts college of evangelical Christianity.

I would like to begin with a reading of Psalm 74:

"Turn your steps towards these
everlasting ruins,
all this destruction the enemy has
brought on the sanctuary.

Your foes roared in the place where
you met with us;

they set up their standards as
signs.
They behaved like men wielding axes
to cut through a thicket of trees.
They smashed all the carved paneling
with their axes and hatchets.
They burned your sanctuary to the
ground;
they defiled the dwelling place of
your Name.
They said in their hearts, 'we will crush
them completely!'
They burned every place where God
was worshipped in the land."

The plaintive words of the psalmist bring to life the images that were just shown. I think now, the tragedy of what happened seven years ago in Kosovo is more real to you-even if you knew nothing about it until a few minutes ago.

From March 17th to March 19th, 2004, over 50,000 Kosovo Albanians participated in an orchestrated and organized campaign of ethnic cleansing. In less than 72 hours, 35 churches and monasteries, many dating back to the 14th century or earlier, were set ablaze and lost to humanity. Dozens were killed. Hundreds were injured. Thousands of homes and business were burned to the ground. And more than eight thousand Kosovo Serbs were ethnically cleansed from their homes.

Within hours of the pogrom's instigation, busloads of ethnic Albanians were being transported to more than 30 locations throughout Kosovo. One UN worker exclaimed: "Kristallnacht is under way in Kosovo."

Instead of stopping the violence, some local Kosovo Albanian police units joined right in. "It was planned in advance," said the UN's spokesperson in Kosovo. Human Rights Watch concurred, stating in its July 2004 report, that "large ethnic Albanian crowds acted with ferocious efficiency to rid their areas of all remaining vestiges of a Serb presence."

In the ancient Serbian capital Prizren, for example, thousands set fire to about a dozen

Christian holy sites that ennobled the city's old quarter. The church of the Holy Virgin of Ljeviska, a UNESCO World Heritage Site built in the 11th century, was burned with the help of car tires, resulting in the permanent loss of its invaluable frescoes. You saw those pictures just now.

This took place in what had been the most religiously free and tolerant city in Kosovo. More than 9000 Serbs lived there just a few years ago. By the pogrom's conclusion, there were fewer than twenty left.

Let me share with you the personal experience of the Rev. Michael Faulkner, pastor at the New Horizon Church in Harlem. Some of you may know him as the man who ran against Charlie Rangel for Congress last year.

In August 2004-just a couple of months after the pogrom-he traveled to Kosovo, together with a few other American Christian leaders. When he spoke about his impressions, he kept coming back to how Kosovo Albanians reacted to his Serbian friends, who were accompanying the group. He said, "During my walk through Prizren, for the first time in my life I saw racism towards people of the same skin color. I've just never experienced that kind of intense hatred before."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the lessons of the Book of Job is that even in times one could call 'beyond despair,' faith and hope must never leave our side. We should always remember that the Lord does not abandon us.

Our hope is driven by our memory, but so is our despair. Our Christian faith tells us to reject despair in favor of hope. So we remember the pogrom, we remember what you just saw: the man who worked so hard to tear the cross down from that church; and we also remember the crowd that applauded his success. But even as we remember, we must still hope-we must still believe that the dawn will break, and that the darkness will recede.

This is the splendor of faith: to know in one's heart that suffering is temporary, whereas hope is eternal. It is not the ruthless who shall inherit the Earth, but the meek.

Once we recognize God's image in ourselves, we must also recognize it in every other human being. Even in our sworn enemy.

The commandment to "love your enemy" is the moral center of the teachings of Jesus. No matter what that enemy does, however dreadful his crimes may be, he is also made in the Lord's image. And just like He loves you and me, God loves him, too.

In the wake of the terrible pogrom of March 2004, we decided to put a stop to the cycle of violence.

This wasn't only a choice about how to deal with the other side. It was also about healing our own heart. Hate distorts the hater most of all. It perpetuates itself, and becomes a vicious circle-a self-fulfilling prophecy of unending strife and conflict. After a while, one can't walk or see straight anymore, bowing at the altar of retaliation.

That's how Kosovo has been for as long as anyone can remember. I hit you, you then hit me, I hit you back and you hit me back again.

One can then go on to destroy homes and burn churches-and one doesn't see anything wrong with that. One is putting all his strength into breaking off that cross. One starts to say, 'this land is mine and mine alone.'

Ladies and Gentlemen,

To destroy what others have built, in the conviction that one thereby erases the truth of it ever having been there, is an act of supreme inhumanity-a horrendous crime of cultural cleansing.

At its very core, that's what the struggle over Kosovo is about. It's a struggle for identity. Well, for us Serbs, Kosovo is like the very air we breathe. It's the beating heart of our culture-and home to our most sacred shrines. Kosovo is the land where hundreds of thousands of Serbs gave their lives for their country and the cause of freedom.

Here's a story from the First World War. When the Serbian Army was forced to retreat across Kosovo and into Albania-as a result of a combined German and Austrian offensive in the winter of 1915-they found it tactically necessary to traverse the very plain on which the battle of Kosovo against the Ottoman Turks had taken place, back in 1389. This exhausted army, led by our ailing, seventy-two year old king, Peter the First, took off their boots, and walked silently across the frozen field, in quiet respect for our fallen ancestors who laid buried in unmarked graves for miles in every direction.

We have an unbreakable bond with Kosovo. Here's what Patriarch Pavle-who led our Church for almost twenty years before recently passing away at the age of 95-said about Kosovo: "It is the wellspring of the Serbian spiritual tradition, and of our statehood; the heart and soul of our nation-indivisible and essential. That is why our forefathers consecrated its soil with thousands of beautiful garlands: adorning the land with magnificent churches and monasteries dedicated to the glory of God."

Kosovo is our Valley Forge and Yorktown, our Alamo and Gettysburg, our Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima-all rolled into one.

It is in our dreams at night, and in our prayers in church.

It is the 'apple of our eye.' It is our Jerusalem.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The March 2004 pogrom constituted a political turning point in the struggle over Kosovo.

For close to five years, the international community had been acting as the interim administrators of Kosovo, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999). This resolution, which is still in force, explicitly reconfirmed our territorial integrity and sovereignty over Kosovo. It also established the "Standards Before Status" policy, which forbade discussions about Kosovo's legal 'status,' until good governance 'standards' had been met. These explicitly included religious freedom and implementing the human rights of the Serbian community-such as the right of return for more than 200,000 of them displaced by the conflict.

But only a few months after the pogrom, the "Standards Before Status" policy was abandoned. It degenerated into Status and no Standards.

'No Standards' explains why not a single individual remains behind bars for killing Serbs or burning down those churches during the March pogrom. 'No Standards' meant that aggressive behavior was de facto rewarded. And the ultimate result was the February 17th, 2008 unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo's ethnic Albanian authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For three years, democratic Serbia has been working very hard to oppose the UDI-using exclusively peaceful and diplomatic means.

This was a paradigm shift in favor of peace in the Balkans. For the first time in the history of our region, an issue of such fundamental importance and complexity-passionately involving all at once identity, boundaries, communal rights, opposing historical narratives-was steered clear of resorting to the force of arms.

We did not opt for any punitive countermeasures. But what we said was this: we will never recognize UDI, explicitly or implicitly.

This was essentially an attempt to forcefully change Serbia's constitutional, internationally recognized borders. No proud and democratic country-be it African, European, Asian or American; be it small or large, rich or poor-would act differently, if it ever found itself in our situation.

With the strength and conviction of a unified nation, we affirm: this shall not stand. And neither will any other attempt to impose a one sided, illegitimate outcome. No one can ever make us accept that-in this present, or in any future, generation.

The truth is, the UDI has not lived up to its promise. By every conceivable measure, the residents of the territory are not better off today than they were three years ago.

The economy has sharply contracted, with unemployment over fifty percent and rising-especially amongst the young and educated. Corruption is out of control, and public finances are in disarray. The judicial system is highly dysfunctional, and a culture of impunity dominates the society.

Serbian property continues to be usurped; our homes stand empty from looting; and our churches and graveyards keep getting desecrated.

Freedom House does not classify Kosovo as an "electoral democracy." This was even before the recently held elections where fraud was rampant, and multiple re-votes and re-counts were required-prompting the European parliament's election monitoring delegation to Kosovo to state that "serious shortcomings underscored insufficient political will, including at the grass root level, to conduct a genuine election in line with [contemporary] standards and good electoral practice."

Kosovo's international position is precarious. It failed to accede to any regional or international political organization.

In short, Kosovo is stuck in a legal, political and economic limbo as a result of the attempt to

unilaterally break away from Serbia.

Lincoln said it best: secession is the "essence of anarchy."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The past three years have taught us that there is simply no sustainable alternative to a negotiated solution. Dialogue is the only road to peace in Kosovo.

It is the only way to ensure the 'axes and hatchets' are laid to rest for good.

The talks that finally got under way a few days ago are a good start. They could help to put aside the fear that stands at the foundation of unilateralism.

There will be many issues to discuss, and some of them will be complicated. As we move forward, we should strive to build trust and understanding. Results will come, if the parties demonstrate good faith, working hard to achieve constructive arrangements, leading to a mutually-acceptable, comprehensive settlement.

A just compromise is what we're after-and that's the only way. It's what the dialogue should ultimately produce: a transformative peace between Serbs and Albanians, predicated on the completion of a process of genuine reconciliation.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Without reconciliation, there can be no stable and secure future for our part of Europe. It's the

only way to ensure all of us are able to reach our full potential.

But that's not all reconciliation is about. It's a call we must answer, because it rests on the immovable foundation of faith. With reconciliation, enmity and estrangement are no longer; it abolishes what the apostle Paul called the "barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" between nations.

True reconciliation is based on forgiveness, repentance, and contrition. It is about forsaking vengeance, so one can begin anew.

But true reconciliation is not about pretending that things are other than they are. It exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the hurt. It retains all the complexity, and brings the full truth to light.

That's how it makes a 'new beginning' possible-but only if both sides are ready to make the transformation.

Our two nations, Serb and Albanian-each as valiant and proud as they are set in their respective ways-have traveled through recent periods of tragedy.

Sometimes it is tragedy that produces the opportunity to achieve 'the new beginning.'

In my view, working towards it requires honoring everyone's identity, not denying it. This means one has to know the past, of course, but one must not let this circumscribe his ability to reach beyond the present. That's an impossible task if one persists in trying to falsify the historical record.

One mustn't downplay the significance of terrible crimes, or say they didn't even happen. That just hardens souls. It entrenches opposing positions. It gets people thinking about reinforcing

the "wall of hostility" Paul writes about, instead of taking it down.

Unfortunately, that's what the authorities in Kosovo appear to be doing.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some of you may have heard about the recent allegations that leading public figures in Kosovo are involved in organized crime-specifically, money laundering, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking.

That they are responsible for kidnapping hundreds of Serb civilians before, during and after the 1999 conflict-and that these abductees were sent from Kosovo to secret detention camps in the Republic of Albania.

Once there, they were undergoing forced surgery, before getting murdered. Their internal organs were being extracted, and then sold on the international black market-a uniquely monstrous practice in the voluminous annals of brutal warfare in Europe.

These disturbing claims are summarized in a recent report that was adopted by the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, entitled "Inhuman Treatment of People and Illicit Trafficking in Human Organs in Kosovo."

The report explicitly identifies Hashim Thaqi, Kosovo's current 'prime minister,' as the leader of the group responsible for these atrocities, the Kosovo Liberation Army. It also categorizes Xhavit Haliti, right now 'deputy speaker of the assembly,' as a key personality of organized crime in Kosovo, and names one of Hashim Thaqi's advisors, Shaip Muja, as an apparently "leading co-conspirator" in the trafficking of human organs.

Those dreadful contentions have shocked the conscience of the world. Obviously, we must to get to the bottom of them as soon as possible. The truth has to be revealed.

We need a serious criminal investigation to ascertain the veracity of these charges.

To be effective and comprehensive in scope, this investigation has to be internationally mandated, as well as internationally accountable. It must also be able to provide an effective witness protection and relocation program, in order to guarantee credible testimony by all without fear of retribution.

That is why Serbia has asked for the establishment of an ad hoc investigating mechanism created by-and accountable to-the UN Security Council. A single authority must ultimately coordinate the investigation process, manage the jurisdictional issues, and ensure the proper administration of justice.

We have made it clear that uncovering the facts about these terrible crimes should not be portrayed as an attempt to assign communal blame. There is no such thing as the guilt or innocence of an entire nation. Guilt, like innocence, is not collective, but personal.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I come to the end of my remarks with a passage from the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly report. It applies equally well to the March 2004 pogrom, as it does to the allegations regarding the trafficking of human organs.

Let me quote it to you: "international actors chose to turn a blind eye to the war crimes of the Kosovo Liberation Army, placing a premium instead on achieving some degree of short-term stability."

It goes on to say that "certain crimes committed by members of the KLA, including some top KLA leaders, were effectively concealed and have remained unpunished."

This must stop. It is high time that everyone makes a pledge to tell the whole truth about what took place in Kosovo.

Such is my prayer for tonight.

That we all start making right choices-that we all allow our hearts to soften, and let the spirit of reconciliation take hold.

That we all work to tear down the 'wall of hostility,' and build in its stead a house we can share-a house founded on a just compromise, one that balances the desires and interests of both Serbs and Albanians.

That, as Martin Luther King said, we come together to write a creative psalm of peace.

And that we finally get to that day when in the Balkans, 'justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.'

Thanks for coming to hear me, and God bless you all.