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The Hunt For Karadzic

By Thomas Sancton and Gilles Delafon/Paris

Strong-willed and determined, impetuous and unpredictable, Jacques Chirac is not called "le bulldozer" for nothing. Even Washington admits the French President paved the way for the Dayton, Ohio, peace talks by insisting, shortly after his election in May 1995, on the get-tough military posture that finally led to a cease-fire after 3 1/2 years of bloody fighting by Serbian, Muslim and Croatian forces in Bosnia. While Bill Clinton and U.S. negotiator Richard Holbrooke got the credit for orchestrating the final accord, they applauded Chirac's crucial role and agreed to hold the signing ceremony in Paris on Dec. 14.

On that day, after Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic had affixed their signatures to the document under the crystal chandeliers of the Elysee Palace, Chirac and Clinton huddled alone in Chirac's second-floor office. The crux of their discussion that evening was what to do about Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his military commander, General Ratko Mladic. A senior French official who had recently returned from Bosnia had convinced Chirac that Mladic and Karadzic still controlled the situation on the ground and could derail the accords at any time.

Clinton had heard this argument before. On Nov. 22, the day after the Dayton talks ended, the U.S. President had met with his advisers in the White House to assess the agreement. With his characteristic verve, Holbrooke had urged that Karadzic and Mladic be arrested and tried by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. But the rules of engagement specified that peacekeepers could arrest suspects only if they "happened" upon them. It was an ambiguity that allowed Karadzic to drive unmolested through several NATO checkpoints after Dayton.

Then, with the ink hardly dry on the accords, the French President was calling for bold action. Chirac was especially angry at Karadzic and Mladic that evening because he had just learned that two captive French pilots whom Chirac had got released had been very badly treated during their captivity. Mladic had reportedly told them, "You are my prisoners, and you will be treated as criminals." Clinton too had been concerned for the pilots. According to a senior French military official, there were two secret Franco-American combat search-and-rescue missions to recover them, but the forces were beaten back in fire fights with Mladic's troops, and several Americans were wounded.

Chirac argued forcefully that Mladic and Karadzic must be brought to justice. High-level French sources deny that the two Presidents explicitly discussed the idea of assassinating the two Bosnian Serbs, but they admit the possibility was seriously examined by French and American intelligence services. Indeed, according to a senior NATO military officer, undercover French troops literally had Mladic and Karadzic in their crosshairs on several occasions but did not fire because there was never an official green light.

Chirac, though free of legal constraints that prevent U.S. Presidents from such actions, would not have made that decision alone. But he well knew that any attempt to capture the heavily guarded suspects could result in the killing of Mladic or Karadzic because of the heavy firepower that such an operation would entail.

Clinton and Chirac agreed that night on the principle of a joint commando raid to capture the two suspects, and a secret Franco-American military committee was organized and assigned to plan the operation. The intelligence services of both countries set about tracking the movements, hideouts and habits of both men.

Meanwhile, U.S. and French experts devised a plan to support local moderates and destabilize Karadzic politically. Holbrooke wanted to isolate Karadzic by jamming all his electronic communications. "But the CIA fought the idea tooth and nail and told me it was technically impossible," fumes Holbrooke. "And that's bull!" A former senior CIA official confirms that such a plan was discussed.

The kidnapping scheme, in the meantime, ran into difficulties. For one thing, the services lost track of Mladic, who is believed to have left the country. The planning then focused on Karadzic. But there were repeated delays. "It's an extremely complicated job of intelligence gathering and military preparation," says a French official. "You need just the right opportunity to carry it out."

By April 1997 a fully detailed plan complete with maps, diagrams and operational data had been drafted and printed in the form of a half-inch-thick booklet with an orange cover; code name: Operation Amber Star. It called for a two-pronged raid involving several hundred soldiers in which helicopter-borne French troops would "neutralize" the 30-man guard around Karadzic, while an elite U.S. commando force would move in and seize the suspect. Depending on the circumstances, those roles could be reversed. But such a hazardous operation could not proceed without head-of-state approval.

On May 27, the 15 Atlantic Alliance leaders and Russian President Boris Yeltsin gathered in Paris to sign the nato-Russian treaty. After the speeches had been delivered and the documents signed, the distinguished guests retired to the garden of the Elysee Palace to chat over champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Chirac caught Clinton by the arm and pulled him off to the side for a private chat with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and newly elected British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The subject of this impromptu mini-summit: the plan to kidnap Karadzic.

Chirac said the time had come to discuss this option seriously. The others agreed but thought it would be extremely difficult to pull off. Clinton wanted the French to spearhead the raid, but Chirac was not keen on taking on that "high-risk" role alone for fear of possible reprisals against his troops in the sector. Clinton and Blair were reluctant because of the potential casualties. Chirac pointed out another problem: they could not launch such an operation without informing the Russians, for diplomatic reasons, or the Italians, whose peacekeeping troops were present in the French-controlled zone immediately around Pale. "But if we tell the Russians and the

Italians," Chirac remarked, "we might as well hold a press conference!" The leaders agreed to continue the planning and intelligence gathering but postponed a final decision.

At the same time, there was a parallel effort to persuade Karadzic to turn himself in. Both French and American military agents were in touch with the Bosnian Serb leader's entourage to discuss such things as the kind of treatment Karadzic would get in captivity, what sort of sentence he might expect, what legal representation would be available to him. But senior French and American officials also delivered a stern warning to Karadzic, saying in effect, "Either you give up voluntarily, or we are coming to get you. If we do, many people could be killed--including you."

A French intelligence officer, Major Herve Gourmelon, long known for his pro-Serb sentiments, apparently got too chummy in his dealings with Karadzic's people and was yanked back to Paris last December. Press leaks out of Washington charged that Gourmelon had warned Karadzic of the kidnapping operation and had even given him the plans. The French admitted their officer had exceeded his authority but denied that he handed over, or ever possessed, the top-secret operational details. Furious over the episode, Chirac ordered an investigation, which concluded that there had been some "carelessness" but "no grave fault."

The Gourmelon affair undermined, at least temporarily, Franco-American cooperation on the war-crime issue. The plan to arrest Karadzic was put on hold in the late summer of 1997 by U.S. General Wesley Clark when he learned of the Gourmelon meetings. Last week the New York Times reported that Washington had finally scrapped all plans to nab Karadzic and Mladic because of U.S. military fears of a bloodbath, repeated French hesitations and the risk of Serb aggression.

U.S. officials contacted by TIME deny that any such hard-and-fast decision has been made and insist the arrests remain a priority. But they say a raid is unlikely at this time for a number of reasons. Among them: an improving situation on the ground. "Their freedom of movement is shrinking," a U.S. military officer says of Mladic and Karadzic. "Sooner or later, they are going to fall off a tree like dead fruit."

Says a senior adviser to Chirac: "As far as we're concerned, the arrest plan is still operative. Don't forget, France has lost 60 soldiers in Bosnia. We are determined to bring these two, and others, to the Hague as war criminals."

For all the planning and tough talk, neither France nor the U.S. has an impressive record so far on bringing war-crime suspects to trial. To date, about 30 of the more than 70 individuals indicted have been sent to the Hague, all but 12 of them voluntarily. Meanwhile, rather than pursuing the war criminals, the allies seem content to wait for the fruit to drop.

--With reporting by Mark Thompson/Washington

Sancton and Delafon are co-authors of the forthcoming book *Dear Jacques, Cher Bill: The Intimate History of a Presidential Relationship* (Editions Plon)

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