A Response to Charles Ingrao and Robert M. Hayden

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Before turning to my contribution to this debate, it would only be appropriate that I thank several people. First, I would like to thank the editors of Southeastern Europe for organizing this debate and for their choice of reviewers. And second, I would like to thank professors Ingrao and Hayden for their detailed and thoughtful engagement with my work. I am in particular grateful for their positive comments on my book (in Ingrao's case quite a few, in Hayden's only a few). Since space is limited, however, I will not reflect on them. Rather, I will limit my efforts to those issues Ingrao and Hayden considered problematic in my argument and evidence.

Prof. Ingrao found two aspects of my book's narrative as particularly deserving of criticism: the “kid-glove” treatment of Franjo Tuđman, and the discourse marked by “gratuitous juicing-up” of objective evidence with “subjective modifiers.” I will deal with these two critiques in turn.

Ingrao is correct that there is a “stock image of Franjo Tuđman as a nationalist demagogue whose gratuitous affronts to the republic's Serb minority helped drive it into rebellion and secession.” To some extent, when it comes to the 1990 electoral campaign, my narrative probably contributes to this stock image because I state that Tuđman led an “ethnically exclusivist drive” of the HDZ, that his campaign “matched the Serb nationalist campaign point by point,” and that his claims “pushed the Croatian and Bosnian Serbs even further into the open arms of Serbia's boss” (pp. 85–86). Tuđman’s actions after the electoral campaign, however, do not fit this stock image, and no amount of personal distaste for Tuđman’s earlier statements or later policies can change that. During this period, Croatia’s president was not “Tuđman the Timid,” but rather “Tuđman the Cautious,” and – as I repeatedly argue – his caution was rooted in Croatia’s unenviable geopolitical position.

A number of events that Ingrao uses as examples of my supposedly mistaken interpretation of Tuđman during this period did actually happen, and I provide ample evidence for them. Tuđman did “decide against materially
supporting Slovenia’s secession because he correctly surmised that the JNA will react by overthrowing his own government” (pp. 177–178). He did build a multi-party coalition of national unity in the summer of 1991 by “enlisting opposition support against HDZ hawks” who demanded a more forceful response to the JNA (p. 195). Tuđman also did “delay seizing JNA outposts because he feared retaliation and realized that the Western powers will do nothing to stop it” (p. 217). These events and Tuđman’s decisions might not fit with readers’ preconceived notions of who Tuđman was, and we can have a long debate about the origins of those preconceived notions. Ultimately, however, my interpretations should be judged on the strength of the evidence, and I would argue that the evidence on these and other issues that Ingrao lists is solid.

Ingrao’s tendency of succumbing to the negative preconceived notions of Tuđman and thus situating the Croatian president’s decision-making outside the context of its time is on full display when it comes to Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). Ingrao faults me here for “never foreshadowing Tuđman’s role in organizing the Bosnian Croat secessionists or their murderous military.” Aside from the fact that I discuss at length Tuđman’s control over the so-called western Herzegovina wing of the BiH HDZ and its decision-making (pp. 287–289), and that I mention the “upgrading” of the various Croatian Communities formed in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the fall of 1991 into the “Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia” in August 1993 (p. 292), I do not understand why I should be expected to “foreshadow” any of the events that happened years after the period with which my book is concerned.

Similarly, Ingrao accuses me of “downplaying the infamous napkin partition of Bosnia over dinner with Milošević, placing it in the context of multiple bilateral meetings between several SFRY republican leaders.” I guess the napkin episode is not that infamous after all, because if it were, Ingrao would surely have recounted it properly. The napkin story never involved Tuđman and Milošević. It involved Tuđman and Paddy Ashdown, and it took place in May 1995 – three years after the temporal scope of my book. My book, however, deals extensively with the Tuđman-Milošević negotiations regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina that did take place during the period with which my book is concerned: March and April 1991 (pp. 150–153), and January and February 1992 (pp. 288–289, 292). I do not dismiss the 1991 negotiations as just part of a series of bilateral meetings that took place at the time. On the contrary, I clearly state that “[b]y agreeing to even participate in a tête-à-tête arrangement with the Serbian president, Tuđman also sent a public message that Yugoslavia’s problems revolved around the Serbo-Croat clash. He thus undermined the broader negotiations among the presidents of all six republics which were taking place during the same period” (p. 153). I also do not fault Tuđman “for allowing Milošević to dupe him