

# Opinion: Lessons From Bosnia

[Scott Simon](#) November 3, 2018 8:14 AM ET



A damaged building, with graffiti saying "Welcome to Sarajevo" on Oct. 2, 1993.

*Kevin Weaver/Getty Images*

When I first came to Sarajevo, in the early days of the siege in 1992, people looked at each other and asked, "How could it happen here?" It was a city of espresso-sippers, jazz lovers and sports fans, who had been intermingling and marrying for centuries, Muslims, Serbs, Croats and Jews. Sarajevans saw foreign films, sang along to The Clash and were sure they were just too smart for the blunt, brutal, dumbness of the destruction that suddenly surrounded

them.

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There is no real comparison between the United States today and Bosnia of a generation ago. But there may be some value in trying to recall how a stable, sophisticated, and tolerant society could be gripped by madness; and begin to come apart.

It began with disinformation from on high: Serbian state radio, beamed from the hills above the city, shook the city awake in the morning with pulsing nationalist punk rock. Voices who went just by monikers, like the names on many of today's social media accounts, said ethnic nationalism had been crushed by internationalists, bankers, Muslims, Papists, and Jews. It said Serbs were under attack by that same improbable and amorphous international coalition, and had to strike back. The voices floated wild prattle about thugs advancing, and armies marching, even as it was Serb artillery in those hills that rained gunfire on the city.

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A society that had been acclaimed as a mix of cultures was suddenly assailed as a kind of ethnic stew that diluted the identity of "blood and soil" — a phrase from the Third Reich I heard in Bosnia, and that is now taken up by white nationalists in the U.S. It helped turn a city of neighborhoods into contending and resentful tribes, identifying people just by the ethnic stamp of their names. It turned neighbors into "those people."

The United States is not Bosnia of the 1990s. But there have been hateful crimes in the news over the past weeks: the two African-American

grandparents [shot to death](#) at a Kentucky supermarket, allegedly by a man who first tried to enter a predominantly black church; and then the [11 Jews slain](#) in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue just a week ago this morning.

The United States is not the Bosnia of the 1990s. But voices on high scorn outsiders and warn of alien invasions and people have been shot because of their blood, faith, and skin color. It may be a week to ask: Who are we becoming?