

Milosevic

“I almost met him once,” said one of the knowledgeable commentators appearing breathless on BBC World on Saturday, at the beginning of a day and evening of punditry by all the usual suspects who have made quite a decent living commenting on the Balkans over the last ten years.

Well I did meet him, on numerous occasions. I met him as a Prime Minister and as the President of Yugoslavia and of Serbia. I met his wife, Mira and his son and daughter. I met him in the company of David Owen, of Jacques Klein, of Klein's successor William Walker, and on a couple of occasions on my own.

He had a superficial charm, like many of his ilk, and he managed to deceive a number of people in international public life, persuading them that he was a man who could be dealt with, a man who could see reason and deliver. He was none of these things. He was a small man in every way. He was. A man for whom the ends would always justify the means. He was above all an opportunist who saw in Serb nationalism an exploitable force that could keep him in power. And it was this single minded pursuit of power to which he, and his manic wife Mira subjugated all that was honest and decent, all that was honourable in his country and countrymen and women for ten years.

When a frightened and pallid Milosevic emerged from the building in 1989 at the celebrations of 600th Anniversary of the Serbs defeat at the hands of the Turks at Kosovo Polje, to declare “No one should be allowed to beat you (Serbs)” and heard the cries of “Slobo! Slobo! Slobo!” for the first time, he realised that in resurrecting the nationalist taboo he had a key to personal power that would enable him to ride on a wave of Serb mythology and national prejudice and paternalism for the foreseeable future.

Four wars later he flew to the Hague, leaving behind him a weakened and widely despised Serbia as a legacy for the living and the dead. These were small and inglorious wars with no heroes and little valour, fought largely for personal enrichment or political grandeur.

There was an over-riding irony that became clear again and again during those times. In realising that crisis and threat, both external and internal were the mainstay of his power, Milosevic started wars to protect Serbs from being forced to live under Croats, Bosniacs and Kosovars and sought. He sought, and from time to time even gained, , spurious international respectability by agreeing to help stop them. He was like a man who sets fire to his neighbour's house and then claims some credit for helping to put out the blaze. The constant attention from the West and its best negotiators, gave him the oxygen to survive.

There was an immense cultural divide between this once small-time Communist party *apparatchik* and those sent to deal with him, the Owens, Holbrookes and Albright. As I wrote at the time, it was a terrible mis-match. A collision of two different universes. Super-power against village politician. The universalist visitor whose

cosmic panorama on the worldwide struggles of opposing philosophies make the rights and wrongs of a regional conflict dwindle to insignificance. Truth to many has become relative to the direction in which they happen to be facing at the time. Like a needle in a compass at the Pole their moral judgement spins round and round, overwhelming them with information and telling them nothing at all.

The parish politician measures his response to them in purely local terms. He uses the limelight afforded by the visiting super-star to further his own ends – for he sees no merit at all in pursuing the nebulous common good espoused by his guests. So it was in Milosevic's Serbia, until the final irony, the bombing by NATO, which gave a last boost to the oxygen supply of the dying tyranny and kept Milosevic in power for an extra 16 months.

One may count the dead and the wounded in their hundreds of thousands who suffered to keep Milosevic and his kleptocracy alive. Include among them the tens of thousands of Serbs who died in Croatia and Bosnia, as well as those put to death in Serbia itself by Milosevic and the scheming men and women who wallowed in his trough of greed and corruption. Do not take one second to mourn for him or to devalue the word condolence by expressing sympathy with his appalling family. Mourn for the dead of Yugoslavia, for even in his small and pathetic demise he has cheated them one final time.