

The Death of Milosevic

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Editorial

It's hard not to feel that by dying in his cell, Slobodan Milosevic finally succeeded in his determined effort to cheat justice. Four years and hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in an effort to move the Balkans away from the sterile politics of ethnic vendettas and grievances. The goal has been to establish the personal legal accountability of the individual politicians and commanders most responsible for the horrific crimes against humanity committed in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990's.

No individual was more responsible for those crimes than Mr. Milosevic. Carla Del Ponte, the chief prosecutor of the United Nations tribunal, told an Italian interviewer that "the death of Milosevic represents for me a total defeat." Without a formal conviction of Mr. Milosevic, survivors of his atrocities are left with only a dismal record of what they endured, while Serb nationalists have their martyr.

Mr. Milosevic's death was bad news for the fledgling notion of international justice, but not, we hope, a total defeat. The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia was established by the U.N. Security Council in The Hague almost 13 years ago as the first international court for the prosecution of war crimes since the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials after World War II. As such, it is supposed to demonstrate that no national leader, no matter how exalted, can ever again commit terrible crimes with impunity.

That remains to be proved. The Hague tribunal has been slow and costly: of the 161 men charged, 32 have been convicted. Worse, two of the most notorious villains on its list remain at large, the Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. The two men are charged with genocide in the massacre of thousands of Muslim men and boys in Srebrenica in July 1995.

It is dubious that the tribunal has had any chastening effect on the Serbs. Some critics have argued that The Hague is simply too far from the Balkans for the Serbs to have any involvement in the trial. Still, a successful prosecution of Mr. Milosevic would have gone a long way toward enhancing the authority of international tribunals.

The underlying idea that those who commit crimes against humanity won't escape punishment is too important to be permanently set back by one death. There is justice in the fact that Mr. Milosevic died in a cell, not in power or comfortably in exile.

